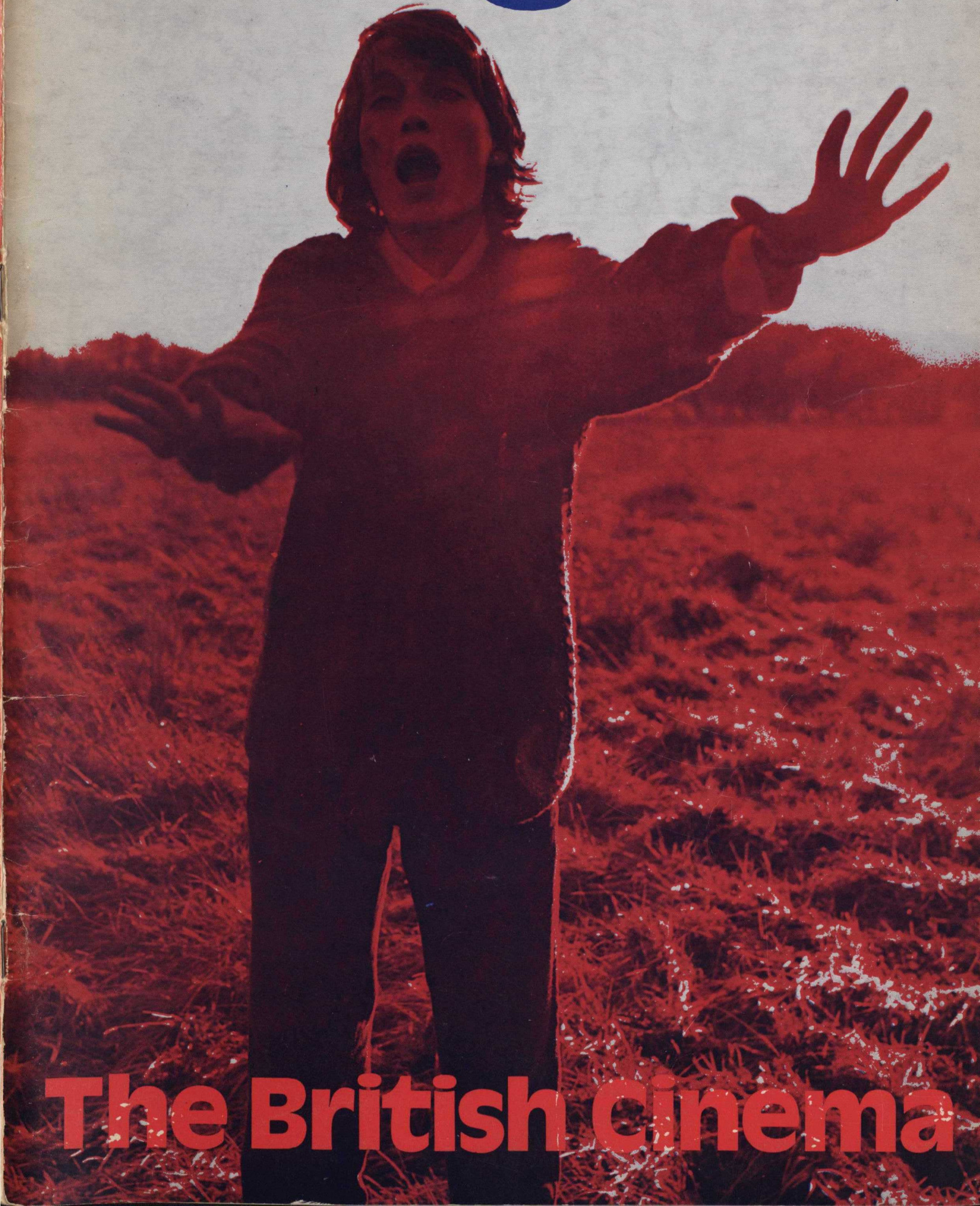


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Front cover: Mia Farrow in Richard Fleischer's **Blind Terror**

Back cover: James Fox and Vanessa Redgrave in Karel Reisz's **Isadora**

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Never mind the quality
feel the width

Between style and ideology

Thomas
Elsaesser



Reisz's *Morgan*

During the last ten years Britain has produced something like 718 feature films.¹ The majority of them was financed either entirely or in part with foreign capital. If the nationality of the director and/or subject and location are any guide, one arrives at just over 400 films which could reasonably be said to be 'British'. Not many people who aren't paid for doing so can probably claim to have seen them all, and the question poses itself of how, statistics aside, is one to approach critically the output of a decade? Film historians tend to talk about 'landmarks' and the line they take is to sound a roll-call of those films which for one reason or another were given wide publicity at the time — from *Room At the Top*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, via *Tom Jones*, *This Sporting Life*, *A Hard Day's Night* to *Morgan* and *Women In Love*. The implication is that the chronological sequence represents a meaningful development in other respects, although the belief that whatever gave them their popularity or press-coverage must be a sign of permanent value and importance is never explicitly justified. That such a continuity, in any but the most trivial sense, may be just a convenient fiction and seriously misrepresent both actual achievements and the

more creative tendencies underlying it, must be apparent to anyone remotely familiar with the caprices of the professional critics (sometimes bold enough to defend their omissions by complaining that they hadn't been sent press-tickets), or the stranglehold exerted by the distribution circuits on production and release, with the inevitable financial censorship this implies. Added to this a dose of snobbery, an incurable bias against the cinema as something that can be looked at seriously, and the result is likely to be distorted.

And yet, when this is said, there is no disguising the fact that good British films during the last ten years are few and far between, and those few have more often been made by foreigners. Hardly a single British film matches Polanski's *Cul de Sac*, Skolimowski's *Deep End*, or Antonioni's *Blow Up*, and directors like Losey, Lester, Fleischer and Preminger, when they work in a British setting seem to convey more 'Englishness' in their films than the amorphously international products signed by Richardson and Yates or the irretrievably parochial films of the Boultings, Ralph Thomas or Montgomery Tully. Abroad, the British cinema has a poor reputation (and that not only because it likes to export such gems as *On the Buses*, recently seen in Hamburg as 'Wir lieben unsern Doppeldecker'). True, there have been international awards — *The Knack*, *It...*, and more recently *The Go-Between* and *The Devils*. In some quarters, the 'renaissance' of the 50s is still fondly remembered, and in France young directors like Platts-Mills or Loach, have almost something of an 'underground' reputation. Maybe this is as much as can be expected, it is certainly no worse than for instance, Germany's record since the war — though looking at the film scene today, there is a German 'alternative' cinema with feature films, 'experimental' and 'political' films on a scale quite unimaginable in this country.

Why should it be that Britain with a long-established, at times prolific, though now obviously ailing industry, seems incapable of producing feature films which could rate with the best made in France, Italy, America, Sweden or Japan? Perhaps this is an impossible question, and therefore impossible to answer. What follows is an attempt — no doubt by some considered unfair, because relying on assumptions which could be interpreted as prejudices — to make a case against the British cinema in the way it has been practiced and also written about. The case is based on raising certain issues concerning feature films in general that have been discussed both in Britain and elsewhere, notably the use and function of style, the question of a film's latent ideological bias, the form and content of cinematic realism, and the implications of Hollywood's lapsed hegemony. The problem is that from this perspective the British cinema seems to inhabit the worst of several worlds, displaying all too many vices and practically none of the virtues of the commercial cinema, while never having seriously ventured into the realm

of an 'art' cinema at all. To aim one's sight this high may appear overlooking the trees for some idealist wood, but a time in which film-making is evidently undergoing a drastic transformation seems as good as any to try and adjust one's vision. The contention is that — on a very casual acquaintance with the British cinema — *Blind Date* and *Peeping Tom*, for example, might be more significant films to have been made in 1959 than *Look Back in Anger*, that *Sammy Going South* and *A High Wind in Jamaica* are more personal works than *This Sporting Life* and *It...*, and that even *Brides of Dracula* deserves a more lasting place in British film history than *Oh What a Lovely War*.

If these judgements seem at all like heresies it is because British film criticism has always favoured a loosely sociological view — perhaps by necessity as much as by choice — which at its best has managed to define the attitudes that films voluntarily or involuntarily project about British life, on the subject of politics, the working class, sex, the army, individual responsibility, religion or education. Any more strictly aesthetic angle has always been difficult to pursue, for a variety of reasons, not all of which are peculiar to the British cinema. One that stands out nonetheless is very aptly defined in *A Mirror For England*: 'If a clearly marked personal style is one's criterion of interest, then few British films reward the concern given to such directors as Dreyer, Bunuel, Franju and Renoir.' It is the strength of Raymond Durgnat's book that from the outset he accepts the limitations of the British cinema, for it goes a long way towards justifying his thematic analysis, and it allows him to isolate very cogently some of the basic ideological differences underlying British and American film-making of the forties and fifties.

Homological Structures

However, the most obvious objection to any sociological approach is that it is neither film-history nor film-criticism, but uneasily shares a certain positivism with the former and an evaluative stance with the latter. The exercise has a way of becoming tautological: one analyzes in films those aspects as significant which confirm one's assumptions, without appreciable gain in the accuracy of one's observations, even if the examples broaden the basis of one's reference. Films undoubtedly bear a relation to social life, but it is hardly more direct than the way parliamentary debates relate to economic and political realities. Each one has, to a greater or lesser extent, its own 'code' and in both cases, the code is integral part of the message. How exactly this code is constituted in a film is being increasingly studied, but it covers to some extent the ground commonly described as 'style'.

The exact way artistic considerations, with their autonomous standards and values, come into contact with the financial reality is — on the epistemological level — a very difficult point. Recent efforts to establish 'homological structures' seem most likely to provide a clue, given the assumption that they play a mediating role.

The problems involved in such a study of the ideological elements in both film-aesthetics and film-production are prodigious, and it presupposes at least two things: that it is possible to identify and describe historically as well as structurally the conventions, intentions and practices which constitute the aesthetic level, and likewise, that the mechanisms and motives which govern the financial and economic factors can also be seen to possess their own logic. As with previous issues of *Monogram*, we are here concerned with the degree of aesthetic 'coherence' of a certain type of cinema, as a prerequisite to drawing any conclusions about the nature of an interaction between style and ideology.

Ideological critique implies that there is always another meaning underlying the ostensible one, and that this meaning reflects the realities of a social situation. The emergence of this type of criticism during the last decade has a particular relevance to the cinema, and especially the British cinema, being very much a cinema where individual and collective intentions have been communicated, both verbally and on film, in 'class' terms. Such a critique is not new in England. For example, on those comparatively rare occasions when British film-makers or critics have felt in a polemical mood, it has often been a question of some form of social or moral commitment (Lindsay Andersons' *Stand Up, Stand Up* comes to mind) which, when scrutinized by someone like Durgnat who did not mince his words, showed its ideological underbelly, namely the rallying of middle-class intellectuals to the defence of British liberalism, covering a rearguard action of condescending nostalgia about the heartiness of working class life.³ It takes very little to prove, for example, that the idea of realism to be found in the British documentary school and Free Cinema showed a very rudimentary understanding of social reality and embodied a whole number of romantic fictions, manifestly and often selfconsciously 'fabricated' on the level of stylistic effect. What one deplores is that the British cinema is unlikely to come up in the near future with its equivalent of *Advise and Consent*, *Hands Over The City*, *The Battle of Algiers* or even *Z*. It has something to do with the British attitude to national institutions as an unfit subject for anything other than the Carry On treatment and perhaps also sixties Britain has developed a tradition with the fact that during the sixties Britain has developed a tradition of competent journalism; one must be grateful that the response to Upper Clyde Shipbuilders will in all probability not be a remake of *Shipyards Sally*, but more likely a documentary along the lines of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett's *Rank and File*.

A Realized Point of View

On the other hand, what is most absent in British film-criticism is any very precise or even mildly provocative concept of cinematic specificity, of what the cinema can do better than any other medium, or at least in what its fundamental aesthetic virtues lie compared with literature, visual

art or journalism. Back in 1948 Richard Winnington wondered how so many British films managed to contrive 'with something like genius neither to inform, excite, entertain, titillate or engage the eye'.⁴ This complaint of uninspired drabness has been repeated frequently since, but only in 1962, when *Movie* in its first number published a 'talent histogram' did the debate take a more decisive turn. *Movie's* intention was a straightforward indictment of the British cinema in favour of Hollywood (only Losey, Fregonese [sic], Hamer, Holt and Karel Reisz were credited with anything better than competence), and the editorial stated that 'all we can see (in Free Cinema) is a change of attitude which disguises the fact that the British cinema is as dead as before, perhaps it was never alive. Our films have improved, if at all, only in their intentions. We are still unable to find evidence of artistic sensibilities in working order. There is as much genuine personality in *Room at the Top*, method in *A Kind of Loving* and style in *A Taste of Honey* as there is wit in *An Alligator Named Daisy*, intelligence in *Above us the Waves* and ambition in *Ramsbottom Rides Again*.' What such abrasive language wanted to repudiate was the then widely held belief that Richardson, Schlesinger, Clayton or Anderson had somehow given the British cinema an artistic form and a sense of style. By taking the *Cahiers* line on 'auteurs', *Movie* rightly sought to get closer to a specifically cinematic vision, for the 'auteur theory', despite its ideological bias in favour of an individualist mythology, is still an indispensable instrument to get the properly aesthetic criteria into focus, because across all the complexities of producing a film, it concentrates on the evidence of a realized and articulated point of view. *Movie* had its own prejudices and blind spots, but its writers convincingly showed that they had actually looked at the films they wrote about, whereas in those days *Sight and Sound* was still basing itself on plot-synopses and press-handouts.

An important question, then, about the British cinema is 'why are good British bad?'⁵ *Movie* answered it by the bland assertion that there just wasn't anyone around who was talented enough. But film-history shows that 'talent' in the cinema is often as much a function of concentrated opportunity (Hollywood), of a national tradition strong in the visual arts or with a solid critical and intellectual culture, such as Italy or France and Germany before the War, and not least of all, it seems to appear where there are active film-schools and a nationalized industry (Poland and Czechoslovakia). None of these conditions prevail in Britain today, and the few film-makers of any talent have been consistently denied opportunities to work during the sixties (Powell, Holt, Mackendrick), so that a difficult and unfavourable economic situation for 'British' films coincided with a dearth of new ideas in film-theory and criticism, which even the sporadic appearance of *Movie* did little to remedy. Now that this state of affairs appears to be changing, one still has reason to deplore the distance

that separates the 'new' critics from those who are actively engaged in making films, neither apparently having much confidence in the other's intentions and aims.

One possible reason why Britain so far has hardly ever developed a truly cinematic cinema is the long-standing (and perhaps not altogether dishonourable) streak of philistinism in British culture, if by philistine we understand a critical attitude which makes aesthetic values depend heavily on what are first and foremost moral assumptions putting forward conventionalized norms of conduct and feeling or are designed to consolidate socially desirable behaviour. A director like Losey can use such a conception dialectically, but the fact is that today, the social conditions and the intellectual climate no longer give much credibility to any argument which conflates moral prescriptions



Suppressed finer sentiments? (*The Music Lovers*)

with aesthetic criteria or confuses ideological assumptions with universal truth.

In the sphere of criticism, this tradition has produced a series of misleading antitheses of, for example, fantasy and realism as different 'genres', entertainment and culture as mutually exclusive, and it has encouraged a neglect of artistic style because seen across a preconceived idea of content. Style in a more traditional sense is vision articulated, but as such it is by necessity autocratic, because its aim is to impose — for the duration of a film or the length of a novel — an 'order' on the phenomena and a 'model' on the world.

As the mechanisms involved in constructing a conventional intrigue or plot become more apparent, the idea that a film is in some sense 'exploring' a given reality or reproducing it seems less and less plausible: thanks to semiologists like Metz we now have impressive proof that

every shot in a film is already a sentence, a statement, the assertion of an attitude, and that therefore no image can claim to be neutral or purely referential in relation to what it depicts. In the face of an embarrassingly rich and expressive potential inherent in filmic language, where every image is always in danger of becoming, so to speak, an exclamation mark, it is not surprising that one of the great aesthetic priorities in the history of the cinema has been visual understatement, the low emphasis, the ironic tone, the symbolic allusion as against the direct statement, and finally the search for 'realism' — all efforts to gain conscious control over the plethora of attitudes and to detract skilfully from the obtrusive voyeurism which the camera produces when set in motion by a director who does not subdue the prying eye into a unified vision or use the diverse per-

spectives to create an intelligible space. Out of the multitude of individual 'statements' that make up a film, a speaking voice will have to detach itself, and that is why, when discussing the aesthetic meaning of a narrative film, one is inevitably trying to listen to that voice and to look for the articulated point of view as the principle of coherence.

Hitherto, in the vast majority of films, certain conventions in the patterning of drama and narrative have regulated the relation between descriptive and interpretative, naturalistic and symbolic potential of the filmic discourse, but with the decay of these conventions and the impoverishment of dramatic fictions in which to actualize significant experiences, film-makers are having to create the framework that mediates vision and reality more and more out of their knowledge of a strictly cinematic, often self-referential meta-language. This application of

knowledge about the cinema itself is what today constitutes the modern idiom.

What is most apparent in the British films over the past decade which have freed themselves from the depiction of social stereotypes and turned towards a more 'European' cinema of individual character and consciousness is the lack of sophistication in the handling of this cinematic syntax, when compared with the continental 'art' cinema of the same period: Schlesinger, Anderson, Russell, Richardson hardly measure up to, say, Louis Malle, René Allio, Olmi or Wajda — for even if one accepts that a concentration of talents like Chabrol, Truffaut, Rohmer, Godard and Rivette is rare by any standards, the excessive modesty of British 'quality' directors has disconcerting implications. There is hardly a director working regularly in Britain to-



Bar-Mitzva (*Sunday Bloody Sunday*)

day (except Losey) who can be said to have — whatever his personal themes or the level on which he chooses to work in the industry or outside — a specifically cinematic eye, an approach to the material he is dealing with, which is shaped by the requirements and possibilities of the cinema, and that there is consequently no director who has an awareness of form and style sufficiently sensitive that each movement of the camera counts, each angle and composition of the frame is there to advance the thematic movement, embody a point of view or clarify the action. This may be a harsh judgement, but loose-jointed narratives, careless handling of camera movements, misplaced visual emphasis seem far more often the cause of good British films being bad than lack of promising subjects. The wasting of a close-up, a travelling for mere effect or an awkward zoom is as noxious in the

cinema as a rambling, imprecise, woolly prose-style in a novel, and no less noticeable.

Fade-out on Realism

That style or 'form' has a decisive effect on the meaning of the material is perhaps clearest if one looks at the British cinema's reputed strength — its socially conscious realism. During the late fifties, when a certain populist revival reached the cinema, percolating down from left-wing intellectuals and supported by writers and playwrights, there seemed a willingness to confront the realities of British society by treating those subjects and aspects of daily life as fit material for dramatized fiction which had previously been either taboo or hopelessly distorted. Certainly, an unmistakable difference — even today —

proletarian in its attitude and accurate in its social observations.

The fact is that by seeking 'realism' primarily on the level of location and atmosphere, the British cinema, especially during its 'renaissance' has remained almost as naïve as ten years earlier: it confined itself to a sometimes astute but more often mechanical combination of an industrial (northern) working-class setting with readily identifiable characters and class stereotypes. The conflict of work and leisure, or between the provinces and London, which formed the backbone of the Hoggart-Wesker offensive, became submerged in a cinematic formula where realism meant living in a cramped terrace house and going to work on a bike. From big-bosomed mum or the brassy blonde in satin blouse, to tough talking police constables and Woodbine smoking pub mates, the heroes (and the audience) could without an instant's hesitation pick their side and hold their own when it came to defending the dignity of the working man with a few obscenities. Sympathies were loaded, the dramatic conflicts either pushed into melodrama or they dissipated themselves in squalid little compromises, and the fade-out became a popular device, because it conveniently suspended the issues whenever they became interesting.

Not for nothing did 'kitchen sink' become a term of abuse: Free Cinema quickly demonstrated a fundamental point about 'realism' in the cinema — that it is purely conventional and therefore infinitely 'corruptible' through repetition, unless it is, as in the American cinema, stylized into a 'genre', where it can become the readily accessible and comprehensible vocabulary in an overtly metaphorical discourse. This, however, did not happen in Britain, and within a matter of half a dozen films, the admirable desire for a hard-hitting, socially committed cinema spawned cliché after cliché, until the scene of a couple overlooking belching gas-works and a row of sooty houses from the surrounding hills became as meaningful a shot as the Eiffel tower in a picture about Paris. Only where a psychological or moral conflict between the characters is sufficiently well established, where there is a theme, an argument to absorb the setting into the metaphoric language of emotions and actions (as does happen intermittently in *This Sporting Life*) can such a conception of realism escape from exploiting a social milieu simply for its spurious exoticism.

The latter is much in evidence in a film like *Get Carter*. The sordid has become unashamedly decorative, and the tough, brutal act or the sadistic gesture has to cover Mike Hodges' tracks wherever the plot motivation becomes too threadbare not to be conspicuous by its absence. What might have been a sombre accumulation of actes gratuits to give an image of unrelieved evil and degradation shrinks from its own nihilism by having a stock revenge motif plugging all the gaps — which is furthermore grafted on a sentimentality difficult to bear (Michael Caine sobbing as he watches his niece

being seduced in a blue movie), let alone take seriously. **Get Carter** is 'successful' because it acknowledges the frankly erotic-sexual undercurrent of the action movie and indulges in a protracted sado-masochistic fantasy which has a plot so complicated as to become unimportant, or rather, it uses the obstacles set up for the hero as titillations on the way to the gratifying climax which cleverly combines ejaculation and death.

Get Carter confirms that both the action movie and the thriller have not survived self-conscious adaptation by nostalgic Hollywood addicts in any form other than reductive parody. By contrast, Ken Loach's idea of an effective realism however, has little to do with film history being reflected in shallow waters — more with the way television applies its highly stylized and conventionalized formal techniques to often unconventional, contingent and unstructured material. The dilemma is that muck-raking exposure of social sores has to be processed into smooth-textured popular entertainment. In **Poor Cow**, his least successful and yet formally most ambitious feature film, Loach deliberately de-dramatized the narrative and made use of the more readily adaptable methods of *ciné vérité* (camera 'following' the heroine 'around', fictional 'interviews', first person voice-over, etc). The film manages to build up an engagingly convincing picture of life as the female appendage to a gang of petty London criminals, but stylistically it disappoints as soon as it tries to manipulate the setting for an emotive-symbolic statement — as for example in the scene where Carol White and Terence Stamp are seen kissing under a waterfall. They are so obviously pleased at having found a piece of scenery which resembles nothing more closely than the mentholated cigarette ads on television or in the High Street that it becomes impossible to tell whether Loach intended to indicate the poverty of his characters' idea of happiness, or whether happiness in tv-jargon just 'is' a waterfall. Neither possibility can be discounted on the evidence of the film itself, because the director is more concerned with depicting his heroine in a series of emotionally moving or touching scenes than in translating his own point of view into unequivocal cinematic terms. The same is true of **Kes**: in his rightful desire to put across a strong story for a wide audience, Loach shows little interest in whether his imagery courts the cliché or avoids it by a kind of detached underplaying. That this comes rather close to a false naivety has perhaps half-consciously been admitted by Loach himself, when he remarked that he d'd not like filming in colour, because one could not stop colour from looking pretty — which may be true of television but is definitely not the case if we think of the nuanced way Cukor, Sirk, Minnelli, Ray or Pre-minger can handle colour.

Keeping up with the Schlesingers

Loach is basically a journalist, and a good one, for he cares more about getting some of his points across within a system hostile to his political convictions

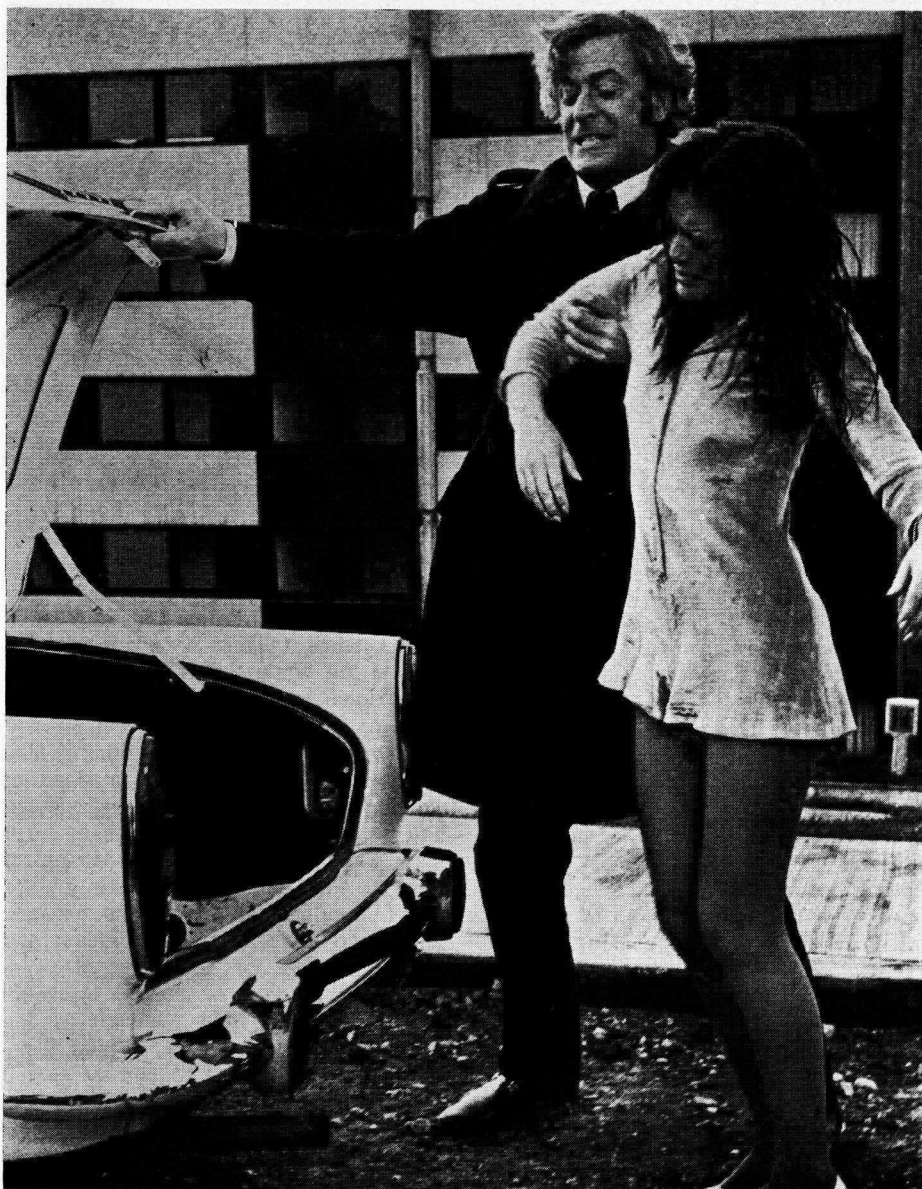
and to mobilize people on social issues he knows are important. Yet from Loach's robust indifference about the subtleties of style and mise-en-scene, it is aesthetically a short step to the solemn pomposities of a middle-brow weepie like **Sunday Bloody Sunday**, which measured by its own Antonioni-esque ambitions, appears incoherent — in its form and thematically. In the long run it is perhaps less grave that Schlesinger gives away an interesting subject to contend himself with psychological commonplaces about emotional frustration, *ennui*, moral impotence and the mortifications of middle-class middle-age sex. What is more worrying is that his mise-en-scene, all too eclectic in its up to the minute professional effects, should be accepted as representing a personal style and as giving a convincing portrayal of its subject.

There are the actors' setpieces, which once again point to the chief 'vice' of nearly all film acting in Britain — that it did not free itself of the theatre before it was swallowed up by the mannerisms of television acting. There is the concession to prevailing fashion which mars one of the more potentially interesting scenes (what would one not give to have been spared the hand-held 'subjective'

tracking shot accompanying the Jewish boy during Bar-Mitzva — as if Peter Finch's identification with his nephew at this point was not already quite explicit), and Schlesinger's didactic handling of visual and dramatic symbolism is little short of catastrophic (the business with the telephones becomes so insistent that one finally suspects an ad for the GPO). An all too rare example of a good visual idea, on the other hand, is the reappearance of Murray Head's arty object for Peter Finch's garden in a West End department store. Its swelling to gigantic proportions could have made a critical point about Peter Finch's increasing obsession with Murray Head, while the latter merely uses him in the way he uses his art — as an object for bargaining, but alas this theme is never followed through, and the criticism is rather swamped by the sentimental context in which the scene appears, with Peter Finch driving along Piccadilly about to be molested by one of his less refined homosexual ~~en~~ lovers.

It is interesting that where the story does seem to imply a dramatic climax (the face to face confrontation of Murray Head's two lovers, Peter Finch and Glenda Jackson, outside the house of their acquaintances), Schlesinger re-

A protracted sado-masochistic fantasy (**Get Carter**)



sorts to an oddly pedestrian kind of naturalism, disingenuously presenting us with a piece of anti-dramatic non-action (disingenuous, because preceded by a formidable build-up of cross-cuts, camera going in and out of focus, so that no spectator can miss the 'significance' of the encounter — which is unfortunately quite typical of the British cinema's concept of realism, *ie* something as awkward, lukewarm, anti-climactic as 'real-life'. The greatest problem which British directors seem to have in this respect is to present their characters at once in a sympathetic light and critically. Instead of incorporating the critical perspective (which is, if one likes, the thematic axis of a film of this kind) into the continuity of the action, through the *mise-en-scene*, the decor, or the nature of the dramatic confrontations, with characters embodying dialectically conflicting, complementing views, the practice is to sentimentalize each character in turn (by means of a 'subjective' presentation), avoid a clearly structured dramatic conflict (because felt as unreal) and let the criticism emerge (by default of a directorial point of view) somewhere between all characters. This is precisely what happens in **Sunday, Bloody Sunday**, and it is as if among the Free Cinema directors the documentary myopia of British realism from the 'thirties and 'forties had never been corrected by the focussing lenses of the 'well-made' fiction film. The trouble with such a bi-focal *mise-en-scene* is that it concedes rather too much to the critics who claim that the narrative cinema has outlived its day: once one realizes, as one is bound to do in Schlesinger's film, that the dramatic-symbolic mechanisms and the stylishness allow the director to avoid taking position *vis-à-vis* his story and to shield behind a series of divergent subjective views, the very procedures of filmic narrative become false, one watches an imposture of human behaviour, a manipulation of pseudo-problems, where unconvincing alternatives and choices are conveyed through gestures stripped of their authenticity. After the intriguingly promising first sequence which visually introduces the three protagonists through the relation of their hands to their professional and domestic environment (Peter Finch as a doctor delicately touching the belly of a patient, Glenda Jackson clumsily knocking over an ashtray and stamping the ash into the carpet, Murray Head poignantly characterized by the empty apartment where a mechanical contraption vibrates a pencil rhythmically over a piece of paper to produce an artistic design) **Sunday Bloody Sunday** is a disappointment, and one is still waiting for the film that Schlesinger might be capable of. The levels of physical and moral incompatibility indicated in this opening scene could have been developed thematically by the rest of the film, but what one gets is a dwelling on the obvious which disfigures the emotional truth of the situation into caricature. Unlike the Americans, British directors rarely see physical detail as more than either a 'realistic touch' or an outright symbol, instead of using it as the basis for de-

veloping moral themes, and there is in **Sunday Bloody Sunday** neither dramatic shape nor visual elucidation of the kind which could give the incipient dialectic (of hyper-developed moral sensibilities confronting their own physicality, of emotionally sterile human beings hungering for tactile sensations), a meaning that would transcend the anecdotal. One's frustration with the film, as with many other British movies, comes from the fact that one so clearly sees the level of intention appear behind the images. The lucid account of the death-agony of bourgeois human relationships, however, never materializes.

The feeling that **Sunday, Bloody Sunday** seems insufficiently worked out in the *mise-en-scene* and contradictory in terms of its dramatic structure is underlined by the fact that it appears trapped in the very contradictions of the ideology it purports to portray realistically (and therefore criticise). It is not so much by presenting his characters as unknowable entities at the mercy of their psychological hang-ups (whose only relations with each other seem to be sexual ones), that Schlesinger implicitly acknowledges the decay of the individualist ethics on which the film is built, but because this state of affairs is interpreted as immutable, absolute, tragic. By hypostatizing the neuroses of his protagonists, abstracting them from any moral, social or indeed metaphysical substratum of values and convictions, Schlesinger tries to universalize them, make their predicament representative of the 'human condition', but in fact seems to get the worst of all possible worlds. Since they are made to appear as puppets of their own sexual obsessions, the supposedly tragic pathos towards which the film is slanted, never quite rings true, because it lacks the vital dramatic ingredient of an inner necessity. As spectator, one is too much outside the characters not to notice the manifest contradiction, the 'false consciousness' displayed. The forces within them and outside are never made apparent in dramatic terms (the surface realism and the naturalistic style prevent the conflicts of class, cultural background or occupation from becoming symbolically present in the action, instead of being merely sketched in as anecdotes) and thus the underlying dilemma of personal autonomy (for instance, the obstinacy of Murray Head who wants to be treated by his loves as a full human being rather than a negotiable sexual object) conflicting with the sense of impotence in the face of a whole, passively endured web of extra-individual influences, is constantly there as an unresolved irritant to one's perception and estimation of the characters, without ever reaching the point where it is directly focussed on by the *mise-en-scene* or the action. Instead, Schlesinger uses symbolic parallelisms to put across a sense of the inevitable: Glenda Jackson's father is seen to neglect his wife, chiefly by being on the 'phone to business colleagues in America. Her lover, Murray Head, likewise leaves her after receiving a 'phone call from New York. Such manipulations of the plot

to play 'fate' to the protagonists and deadlock them in a superficial tragic irony, however, can only discredit the narrative film as a valid dramatic medium.

Much of the work of the directors who were associated with Free Cinema in the late fifties tends to show this discrepancy of accepting the characters at their subjective evaluation, and yet pull the threads of the plot to bring them into line when the issues raised become too complex to fit the predestined pattern. What might have seemed a provocative subjectivism with working-class heroes like Arthur Seaton, Machin or Billy Liar (which only implied cheating a little when rounding off scenes) now looks more like an artistic defect on the level of the *mise-en-scene* indicating deeper ideological contradiction. It makes films like **Sunday, Bloody Sunday** symptomatic not only of the state of the cinema in this country, but of the intellectual establishment which closes its ranks to hail them as masterpieces. Marx once said that what made artists and intellectuals ideological representatives of a particular social class was their inability to transcend imaginatively the limits which their class does not transcend in social life. Judging by the reviews given to Schlesinger's film, the recognition and identification was so complete, the defeatism which the picture exudes so evidently suited to the mood of a post-welfare post-affluence Tory Britain that it will probably be as characteristic of middle class attitudes in the early seventies as **Brief Encounter** (a film of considerably higher artistic integrity) was for the immediate post-war period.

Dostoyevsky in the New Forest

Speaking of **Brief Encounter**, the spirit of sacrifice and renunciation that runs through Lean's film reaffirmed an already self-doubting and slightly odd puritanism (what strikes one today is the erotic excitement Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson get out of their feelings of guilt and shame), which nevertheless conveyed the existence of libidinal urges, the more precious for being kept bottled up. By contrast, the disaffection of socially sanctioned moral and sexual behaviour in the sixties spread to the middle class only to produce — in the cinema at least — an invariably phoney 'joie de vivre'. Sexual liberation is either romanticised into jolly romps on Hampstead Heath taken in slow motion or soft-focus, risqué scenes of homosexual lovemaking, or it is vulgarized into a hunt for phallic symbolism and naturalistic displays of nudity. *A Mirror for England* draws attention to a different stylization of the 'life-force' in British and American movies, which is especially true when one thinks of the anarcho-humorous element in British low-brow comedy signifying a healthy vitality towards the 'facts of life', and compares it to the far more complex drive-orientated hero of almost all Hollywood genres, with the attendant mythology of success, domination and instinctual gratification.

However, a better clue to the nature of the *joie de vivre* in recent British films than the Carry-On type comedy is to be

got from Ken Russell's films. What **The Music Lovers**, for instance, has in common with **Sunday, Bloody Sunday** is that in both cases the leading actress is Glenda Jackson. With an undeniable dedication to her roles, she aggressively flaunts a kind of sullen violence which in Schlesinger's film occasionally teeters on the edge of a more revealing hysteria. Her exhibitionist vulgarity in **The Music Lovers**, however, only just convinces us that it is the over-reaction to a whole spectrum of suppressed finer sentiments. In both films she comes to personify the frustrated life-urge, a fact that points up the different sociological intentions of their directors. Schlesinger is solidly upper middle class, and so are his characters. Glenda Jackson still manages a wry smile which must be the female equivalent of the stiff upper lip. Ken Russell, on the other hand, whatever his personal background, seems to aim his films more or less consciously at the lower middle class, for he has taken not only television techniques, but even more so, television assumptions to the cinema.

With the adaptation of half a dozen composers' lives, one major English novel and one minor one behind him, Ken Russell appears as a particularly deplorable (because hugely successful) example of cultural vandalism thinking itself emancipated — an attitude which is rather well characterized by his own words: 'What I'd really like to do would be to get my own little film unit together like I used to in the old days when Shirley and I would go around London making films and carrying our equipment on the 'bus. And we could all go down to the New Forest and maybe I'd film a story about a composer or a Dostoyevsky story, and all the unit could bring down their families and I'd put them up in caravans or a hotel, and if it was fine we'd work, but if it rained, well we'd just go off and have a party.'⁶

The problem with taking a high-brow view of such an attitude is that it ignores the stamina, the proletarian bloody-mindedness about Russell's naivety. It gives an ambivalence to his impact, if not his methods which deserves closer attention. The ambivalence can perhaps be pinpointed by saying that his films are both the petit-bourgeois' cultural wet dream and exercises in contemporary camp, and that Russell probably doesn't mind which way his audience takes them. Vitality still means having a good time, and the rest is propaganda. Objectively, Dostoyevsky in the New Forest bridges the already minimal gap between the kind of demi-culture purveyed by the Colour Supplement features and its parody in the ads on the opposite page which offer two-tone finish plastic reproductions of Michelangelo's nudes entitled 'Ecstasy', luxury bound, leather grained, hand-tooled editions of *Germinal* and *Oliver Twist*, and complete sets of Rachmaninov, Beethoven and Gilbert and Sullivan for the hi-fi audio unit. Russell's undeniable talent, however, consists precisely in the ability to give a sense of dynamism and energy — indeed, exploration, to his blantly commercializing instincts, and

because he has all the skill of an autodidact without any of the inhibitions which might spoil the fun of using Dostoyevsky or Tchaikovsky for his own crazy quilt. Russell is the imaginative boy who has let himself into the wardrobe department of European culture and by putting on the clothes to see how they fit his own fantasies, he gives them a good airing: his films manage to shake out much of the extremely sophisticated psychological superstructure of bourgeois 'high' art based on sublimation, while at the same time indulging in the more spectacular aspects of the romantic tradition. The element of anti-bourgeois revolt in the romanticism of Tchaikovsky, for example, is in **The Music Lovers** not much more than a kind of with-it flamboyance, put in the service of a mystifying but still widely credited cult of artistic creation as a form of instinctually inspired magic, irrational, uncontrollable, and fed by some warp in the psychological make-up or a physiological personality defect.

Hanno Buddenbrook in Thomas Mann's novel swoons as he plays Wagner on the piano and contracts a fever from which he never recovers — but Mann leaves open the chain of causality (if any) linking these events. An ironic ambiguity about the relation between the physiological, psychological and artistic aspects of 'decadence' is of the essence if one wants to avoid the more grossly misleading sides of Freudian interpretation of artistic creativity, but Russell clearly knows no such scruples, and his causality is always painfully explicit. Not only does he exploit the 'programme music' character of Tchaikovsky's work to the hilt, with slow-motion river banks, blossoming fields and birch tree forests visually orchestrating a scherzo here and an overture there, but the continuity of the action itself is subordinated to the music. The old Hollywood technique of the filmed biography — that every well-known piece of music should have an anecdote or a dramatic incident out of composer's life as its causal origin — is both exaggerated and parodied (as in the 1812 Overture sequence). — In either case, images, music and action are strictly the illustrative means to a much simpler end — the pathological psychodrama — and the semantic autonomy of the individual signifying 'strands' is carelessly tossed away, so as to use exclusively what one might call the 'chromatic' qualities expressing 'emotion', without caring how these emotions are themselves structured or articulated within the various aesthetic-dramatic discourses. An example is the scene where Tchaikovsky is performing his piano-concerto at the conservatoire. Zoom-in on his sister, then on Glenda Jackson, then on the Countess, all three placed at strategic points in the audience. As the music swells on the women are given their erotic fantasy sequence to illustrate their degree of appreciation, until eventually we are back with Tchaikovsky's hands playing the piano. The bad habit of film music, where emotional and visual climaxes are remorselessly (the trade term is 'lavishly') orchestrated with romantic musical stereo-

types is turned inside out, and the logic of filmic signification inverted: Richard Chamberlain pounds the keys of the piano merely in order to make the ladies' bosoms heave and the violinists seem to work their instruments like gigolos just to force an ecstatic sigh from rapturous and panting lips. Russell's method, not unlike Hodges' in **Get Carter**, though more obvious, is based knowingly on the scarcely subliminal erotic suggestiveness of visual and gestural language when expressing violent emotion on the screen. The object is not to give a psychologically or dramatically coherent story, but to break the basically static situation into a series of exhibitionistic *tableaux vivants*, all variations on the single theme of sexual obsession and sexual disgust, using shock cuts, 'false' visual continuity, montage close-up and a technique frequently employed in tv-films about works of art, namely the combination of superimposition and dissolve, which always gives a luxurious, classy effect. By treating his own filmic material, his locations, his decor and his characters as if they were out of a Rubens or Renoir, Russell shows himself something of a *poseur*, but he also underlines the levelling process which has melted down European art history and coined it into advertising currency, at the same time as it is trying to promote a few technical tricks of the photo lab to the status of works of art.

Libido and Style

British films when featuring artists have traditionally assumed him to be a deranged or otherwise abnormal member of society, whose right of existence and social usefulness is to be regarded with scepticism, where his behaviour does not make him downright suspect. Vulgar psychology and vulgar marxism have helped to bolster this stance and given it respectability to the point where 'debunking' has become the universal recipe of how to correct idealist errors of hagiography. Russell's own attitude is both hagiographic and iconoclastic — he makes Tchaikovsky a middle class hero, then debunks him, and leaves the spectator with the doubtless comforting thought that art is after all nothing more highly motivated than one's bed- and bathroom fantasies. This attitude complements a more recent development where art is interpreted as a 'take-it-or-leave-it' 'doing-my-own-thing' discrete activity, undertaken in the level-headed manner of a commercial transaction and deployed as a way of enjoying social status. To be sure, there are those who for various reasons like to present themselves in this way to their public, partly because artists today have to sell themselves with their products in a kind of package deal, and their work only takes on value where the name advertises the art, so that both become objects on the market of cultural consumption. But when, as happens in **Sunday Bloody Sunday** for instance, this defensive posture is taken at face value, one wonders if in fact the result is not an even more philistine attitude. In the portrayal of Murray Head as the young artist, the romantic myth of unconscious creativity

and exemption from social norms has become a kind of whimsical child-like irresponsibility and petulance — which could be taken as a critical statement, if only the film had a consistent point of view, in which such a critical conception made sense.

One of the inspirations of art in the nineteenth century was the way the dynamics of eroticism fed into the exploration of reality and the effort of an artist was to transmute his libidinal energy into 'style'. Psychoanalysis, by uncovering these mechanisms, has reduced such an effort ad absurdum, and it would scarcely be an acceptable self-interpretation for a serious artist to suggest to him that his main reason for the kind of work he was doing was sexual. On the other



Working in a British setting (Skolimowski's **Deep End**)

hand, if psychological interpretations of artistic activity have become more and more inadequate (and **The Music Lovers** is there to prove it), his function and role is no more clearly defined by making him appear a hedonistic drop-out conning the idle rich. One need only to think of Bergman's **Hour of the Wolf**, Franju's **Eyes Without a Face** or Minnelli's **The Bad and the Beautiful** to realize that the 'artist in society' for European (and Hollywood) directors has first and foremost been of interest by the ambiguous nature of the artist's creativity and his perception of the world. The films mentioned all focus on a private vision having to draw on the world outside for its realization, a process which brings about a conflict with the standards and values of the community in which the artist finds himself. Whereas British films tend to see him as an outsider whose otherness one must either somehow accommodate as harmless clowning, or explain away psychologically, the ironic romanticism of European and American films emphasizes the way social conventions and

inner pressures deform and distort the artist's vision into creating travesties or becoming altogether destructive. In Britain Michael Powell belongs to this tradition, for in films like **The Small Back Room**, **Tales of Hoffmann**, **The Red Shoes**, or **Peeping Tom** he has shown the moral perversion and psychic cruelty which an artist absorbs into his vision of the world, and which forces him into an alienation that makes him — to himself and others — a kind of monster.

It is therefore no accident that all the films cited have a strong formal resemblance to the horror movie, because precisely the processes of thought or intuition which dictate to a director that the most 'realistic' form in which to cast a certain theme — here the relation of

Turcs, and apart from directors like Loach in the field of mass-media canvassing, the directors who represent middle-class convictions and ambitions appear neither to have mastered the subtler techniques of the 'liberal' dramaturgy which formed the distinction of Hollywood — the mixing or balancing of audience sympathies, the visual and dynamic definition of a moral or psychological conflict, the symbolic use of detail and particular to indicate universals, the thematic use of colour and 'scope, the transformation of descriptive information and dialogue into action, 'genre' stylization through strong plots — nor did they develop a 'reflective' style in the manner of the European filmmakers with their highly intellectualized use of cinematic space, camera positioning and montage, or the free handling of narrative fictions. In British movies there is no historical depth to character, as in the films of Bertolucci, Bellocchio or Visconti, no philosophical literacy as in Rohmer, no psychological investigation of moral values as in Chabrol, no political conception of individual motivation as in Rosi, no spiritual interpretation of personality as in Bresson.

At the same time, the commercial cinema (following the tendency in America and elsewhere) has evidently lost some of its habitual resilience against 'art' cinema influences, and the invasion of bourgeois cultural sanctuaries, while interesting from a sociological point of view, so far has not made for better films. Gone, too, is the working-class cynicism one used to find in British films, which often gave an invigorating dialectical edge to middle class sentimentality. Left- and right-wing anarchism have alike been inoculated with farce and kept within the confines of situation comedy, whimsy, and the humorous double-take. Despite their biting satire, Lester's **How I won the War** and the even more ferociously aggressive **Bed-Sitting Room** are only spluttering firecrackers zig-zagging along the ground before they disappear into the dark. But it is finally the discovery of the 'subjective' style, of 'lyricism' manufactured by means of zoom, soft-focus and slow-motion to replace and soften up dramatic stereotypes and narrative conventions that has damaged the commercial cinema more extensively than even the dissolution of the star system or the break-up of the studio-controlled product, because it has fragmented the formal coherence of the realistic style, mixing indiscriminately subjective and objective points of view, losing thus the ability of developing a secondary discourse within the narrative itself.

The coherence of a culture or a sub-culture within a culture (such as the cinema) is the extent to which it can impose paradigms, give models of behaviour and response which are accepted as true. Where such a coherence is in evidence, I think one can make a meaningful correlation between artistic style and ideology. As far as the classic American cinema was concerned, this was by no means always a homological or parallel one — a fact which ultimately gives it a claim to serious aesthetic consideration.

Relating Means to Meaning

From the position taken in this article the outlook on the British cinema is a bleak one. In the absence of an economically viable independent cinema of bright young

In Britain, precisely because its cinema lacks (with few exceptions) strong directorial personalities, and has never developed a specifically cinematic mise-en-scene, the correlation is on the level of themes and subjects, which gives a socio-ideological critique of the kind Raymond Durgnat is interested in its validity, but by the same token, makes it far less rewarding from the aesthetic perspective, because the level of coherence is constituted by an extra-cinematic system (the hypothetical 'consensus' or 'middle-class values') brought into the films from outside in order to make them 'legible', and not by a cinematic specificity and a formal coherence controlling the aesthetic means by which ideological contents are reflected, transformed or critically expressed within a film. What is so rare in the British cinema in other words, is a film where the subject is undercut by the style, and the story subverted by the point of view from which it is narrated. Style and ideology are undoubtedly correlated, but the important question from an evaluative position is which determines the primary articulation. Lacking this primary articulation on the level of style, the British cinema has, in the majority of its films, remained ideologically transparent and artistically second rate.

'The medium is the message' goes MacLuhan's catch-phrase. For the cinema one might interpret this as the primacy of 'style' — whether personal or collective — over subject and ideological content. The rapid decline in recent years of the conventional norms by which a recognizable plot-structure and a rigorously 'realistic' diction secured a primary level of formal unity (which gave the notion of style its 'auteur theory' meaning of an independent point of view visually realized within the objective fiction), has exposed cinematic syntax to theoretical and practical scrutiny, and put the onus on the individual film-maker to choose and realize his own system of coherence — which in an age of multiple artistic idioms, a convergence of media, and the loss of a binding view of (social) reality, often means a meta-style imposing itself on a subject — at the price of making it 'difficult'. Conversely, it means, as in the case of the classical directors, a limitation of the range of subjects in favour of stylistic purity and coherence. These seem the only ways in which images can preserve their ability to make a valid artistic statement. Images, like words, where they are not part of a defined, or self-defining discourse, are demagogic. Furthermore, their proliferation has made certain types or combinations useless for anything other than the transmission of clichés. The metaphoric quality of film, its power to create associations between disparate objects, for example, has been systematically exploited by advertising to the point of virtually destroying the possibilities of metaphoric discourse. What showed up Anderson's limitations as a film-maker perhaps more than anything else was that when in *11...* he wanted to express the idea of freedom and youthful vitality he shot a sequence which looks like an advertisement for Honda motorbikes. And this is because Honda motorbikes are



Putting across some points (Ken Loach's *Family Life*)

sold on the ticket of freedom and youthful vitality. Signifier and signified, image and idea, have either become stereotyped into fetishist fixations or have totally parted company and are freely negotiable and convertible — each drawing meaning from the other, but less and less meaningful in themselves, like international currencies on the stock-exchange. The Hollywood style has suffered the same fate as the dollar — one can't draw on it as a reserve anymore.

The chances are remote that within our present society the cinema will again develop a collective style. Just as in writing the gap between journalism and literature has become wider and wider since the second half of the nineteenth century, one can predict a similar separation between television, advertising and other primarily informative uses of cinematic images, and the cinema as an art, with a cognitive potential. It seems certain that only a coherently realized point of view will give the visual density needed to transcend the level of simple ideology, and only a

specific style can inflect the meaningless flux of images assailing us towards any kind of significance. In Britain, very few directors show an awareness of the problematic relation between style and meaning in the modern cinema. As far as one can see, only the work of Losey is there to prove that Britain, too, has its avant-garde film-maker.

1 British feature film production, according to the figures supplied by the Board of Trade, averaged about 72 films a year between 1960 and 1969. With the accelerated withdrawal of American capital since 1969 there has been a perceptible drop in production. Only 67 feature films were made in Britain in 1970.
2 *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1956.
3 'Standing Up for Jesus', *Motion* no. 6, 1963.
4 quoted in Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 2 and Ian Johnson, 'The Decade in Britain', *Films and Filming*, Sept. '62.
5 see Peter Graham, 'The Loneliness of a Long-Distance Runner', subtitled 'Why are good British films so bad?' *Motion* pamphlet, 1963.
6 *Evening Standard*, February 25, 1971 (quoted by Kevin Glover in an as yet unpublished article).

The British Cinema.

2

The hazards of insularity

Jean Paul Török



Great events rolling back to Ireland (Lean on *Ryan's Daughter*)

With the British cinema, as with any other cinema, it has now become impossible to speak accurately of a national production. The erosion of national identity, largely the result of the atomization of Hollywood, has affected the British cinema more seriously than any other. International economic interpenetration will perhaps only affect the French and Italian cinema indirectly or in the distant future, but it has immediate repercussions on the British cinema, directly threatening the national individuality. Unlike the American cinema which always remained wide open to outside contributors and was largely cosmopolitan in character, the history of the British cinema shows that its survival hinges on it being economically independent, and that it perishes when cut off from its national roots. It is, bar a few exceptions, neither a cinema of 'auteurs' nor of 'metteurs-en-scène', and its originality is based entirely on the patricular qualities associated with its insularity — a rule which seems largely valid throughout its history. National production was never more prosperous than during the heyday of the great Rank and Korda empires, and when one reflects that throughout its development the British cinema has always been involved in a continual

struggle with its American rival, nothing would be sadder than to see the Americans win the battle, only to drag the British down with them in their ruin.

In fact, the connection between the British and the American cinema is at present so close that it is only by means of arbitrary criteria and subjective opinions that they can be distinguished from each other. The injection of American capital into the industry has been so massive that the notion of a 'British film' in the way this was understood a decade ago has almost disappeared. To opt for the country of origin of the director is of little help, for the films of John Schlesinger, Peter Yates and John Boorman made on the other side of the Atlantic are pure American products. A film like *Leo the Last*, even though shot in London, seems as cosmopolitan and myth-making as Antonioni's *Blow Up*. In this the careers of the young English directors resemble quite closely the careers of their elders. The generation that came to the fore in the sixties pointed to the same tendency for talent to be dispersed as the industry disintegrated — a process which has set in motion by the liquidation of British Lion in 1963, and which was similar to what happened after the crisis of 1949 and the collapse of the Rank organization.

But while the americanization of superproduction specialists like J Lee Thompson and Michael Anderson was quite radical, it had less effect on directors like Anthony Asquith and Carol Reed who were more firmly rooted in the national tradition. Carol Reed, his reputation boosted by the commercial success of **Oliver** tried his hand at directing an American production, **The Last Warrior**, based on a story by Claire Huffaker which could have done with a more concrete and vigorous treatment. This story of a pathetic tribe of Indians shut up in a reservation in the middle of nowhere deserved something better than the facile crane shots it received. The subject seems artificial mainly because based on a humour/drama dichotomy which clearly does not suit Reed's talent. The heritage of the old style British cinema shows through in the picturesque characterization of people and in their persistently humorous treatment which recalls the Ealing comedies. The story of a newly discovered treaty guaranteeing the Indian community the right to a large slice of territory — including one of the main cities of the state bears too close a resemblance to **Passport to Pimlico** for one not to notice it. Whether intentionally or not, the transposition is quite amusing and gives rise to two or three scenes which have a more subversive meaning than is at first apparent, for example the re-routing of a highway and the capture of a railway convoy, until the point where the film veers towards drama and political parable, and Carol Reed's irresponsibility becomes too blatant for words. And yet, it is more readily excusable than the incurable laziness of a Terence Young, a perfect example of the polymorphic and characterless British director. He has ended up making films which no longer even have the virtue of being 'insular', an attractive quality in the James Bond films which he now appears to deprecate. **The Night Visitors** is a spineless Franco-Italian co-production with scarcely anything worth remembering in it apart from a good racing sequence along the coast in an Opel GS, and an impassive performance by James Mason who stoically bleeds to death during almost an hour in the film. It would however be unfair to damn the maker of **Corridor of Mirrors**, for he is still capable of creating a surprise provided he has a sufficiently bizarre script (cf. **Valley of the Eagles**, **Zarak**, **Dr. No** and even **Wait until Dark**).

2.

As early as the thirties Alexander Korda stated that "the people who make the best national films are always foreigners". The words of this charmingly cosmopolitan Hungarian who, having made England his adopted home and become a personal friend of Churchill, produced a whole series of films to the glory of the Empire, seem to foreshadow the success of his near-compatriot Billy Wilder whose **Sherlock Holmes** appears the most accomplished and sophisticated British production of recent years. The only work which I think can stand comparison with Wilder's in this respect are the films of David Lean and Ronald Neame. **Ryan's Daughter** and **The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie** are works of unquestionable originality — i.e. they have a definite sense of origin — in spite of (and also because of) their outmoded form and their astonishingly academic style. This conservatism is not surprising considering that both di-

rectors were moulded by Noël Coward in the old days of the Cine Guild which together with Ealing Studios was the most enterprising and creative production unit of the Rank organization.

The accusation of British film makers being academic while their colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic are praised for their 'classicism' is wide open to criticism. Ronald Neame is taken to be, like so many others, an able technician, but insipid and with no individual style. Yet a glance at his filmography (which comprises only fifteen films) shows that he was responsible for three of the best comedies of the fifties, **The Card**, **Man With A Million** and **The Horse's Mouth**, the first two, adaptations from Arnold Bennett and Mark Twain, being at least as good as the best Ealing productions, while the third comes close to being a masterpiece. Neame also directed a brave and remarkably lucid anti-colonialist film (**Windom's Way**) at a time when this was an uncommon subject to deal with. In addition, he made a well-seasoned military satire (**Tunes of Glory**) and more recently **Gambit** which is a clever renewal of the theme of the perfect hold-up. He is perhaps not a 'metteur-en-scene' in the most autocratic sense of the term, but he deserves to be respected for his expert choice of scripts, the effectiveness of his scenarios and his skilful direction of actors. These are all qualities present in **The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie**, where the formal restraint belies the immobilities of the subject without thereby changing its scabrous implications. It is a fact that there is always a good script-writer behind the most polished British productions, and in the case of **Miss Jean Brodie** much of the credit for the subtleties of the resulting film must go to Jay Presson Allen (who already had the script for **Marnie** to her credit) for her adaptation of Muriel Spark's novel. This is not to deny the shrewdness and strength of the director's work, for instance, the expert way in which he conveys the ambiguity of the characters or the firm control he exerts over the development of the delicately balanced plot. His 'thirties' heroine had to be both likeable and odious, ridiculous and slightly frightening, old-fashioned and yet plausibly contemporary. The tedium of life in a Scottish boarding school had to be conveyed, a parable on hypnotic fascination and fascism be sketched, equivocal sexual entanglements be concisely described. Maggie Smith is superb in the role of the 'revolutionary' teacher enamoured of Art and Beauty, preaching to her young pupils the ideal of free love, the delights of eroticism, and by an odd twist in her thought, the exotic splendour of Mussolini's regime. The film finely portrays her psychopathic behaviour and the morbid hold she exercises over the minds of her girls, and this in spite of a slightly theatrical style which fortunately disappears in the dénouement, an ending that avoids moral indignation in favour of a truly Jamesean ambiguity.

3.

Perhaps the feeling of disappointment in this article results from not being able to answer unequivocally the question 'which director is most representative of the post-war British cinema?'. Leaving aside the Free Cinema generation, none of whom has yet shown himself superior to the others (I consider Karel Reisz



A quite frightening appetite for ugliness (**The Music Lovers**)

to be slightly in the lead since **Isadora**, but he is just as liable to disappoint us as Anderson is to surprise us), David Lean seems the only possible candidate, even though one has to add a qualifying 'alas!'. Since starting to make films based on spectacular subjects which give scope to his talents as supertechnician, the name of David Lean has entered, if not the good books of the critics, at least into the history of the cinema with his really imposing **Lawrence of Arabia**. The film left one wondering what to admire more, the extravagance of the means or the masterly control over his grandiose material, an oriental chaos fittingly embodying the imagination of a mythomaniac and mysterious adventurer.

Even in such a disaster as **Dr. Zhivago** there were some splendid things, flashes of sequences which could not conceivably have been imagined with more daring megalomania by anyone else since the great Americans. As for **Ryan's Daughter**, it is common knowledge that Lean and his script-writer Robert Bolt, unable to find a sufficiently magnificent subject, decided to create one themselves, by drawing on the ideal landscapes of their imagination, and fusing into one vast totality the infinite backdrop of the Ocean, the wild heaths and the shores as far as the eye can reach, the horizon beyond which great historic events unfold and come rolling back to Ireland. To insert in this monumental panorama an intimate little love story, give it a luxurious surface like the flamboyant façade on some piece of romantic architecture, elevate hidden passions to cataclysmic and tempestuous proportions, in short, to use millions of dollars to transform a banal tale of adultery into a turbulent super-spectacular was a gamble which compels respect if only for being so disarmingly naive in its intentions and unique in its formula. In fact, there is nothing quite like this gigantic and garish film, and its merit springs as much from its exceptional character as from anything else. If one follows film by film the itinerary which led David Lean from the mournful little suburban tune of **Brief En-**

counter to this cosmic orchestration of feelings, one realizes that he is only remaining faithful to the Coward themes of adultery, chance meetings and impossible love. The film in fact embodies a typically British conception of romanticism in the way it tends to see the return to conformity as an expiatory sublimation of the urge for adventure. One can measure the distance Lean has travelled in a quarter of a century right from the chaste idyll between Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson up to the open sexuality in the relationship between Sarah Miles and Christopher Jones, unless Lean wasn't also in this respect concerned to find spectacular aspects in keeping with the rest. The film is brimming over with such amazing scenes that it is absolutely impossible to tell whether they are genuinely inspired or simply try to pass themselves off as such. The storm is undeniably the finest bravura piece the British cinema has given us since Flaherty's **Men of Aran**. It is true that some of the credit must doubtless go to the director of the second unit, Charles Frend, who was trained in the war documentary unit at Ealing and is a specialist in films with a maritime interest (**San Demetrio - London**, **The Cruel Sea**). Finally, there remains the sequence where Christopher Jones commits suicide, which gives a good idea of the tone of the film: against the background of an ocean sunset — the most beautiful sunset in the world filmed by the greatest specialist in sunsets, Freddie Young — Christopher Jones is playing carelessly with a detonator in the middle of a vast ammunition dump and blows himself up at precisely the moment when the sun disappears over the horizon. It could either be sublime or ridiculous and it succeeds in being both.

Although **Murphy's War** was shot by an Englishman, it is an undeniably American film, while **The Last Valley**, made by an American, fits well the description of 'insular'. But is it really necessary to go into these incidental details of production? After all, some of the most significant works of the British cinema are films shot in the United States by Englishmen or made in Britain by Americans. There will always be a confusion over this as long as Britain does not have financial control of her own cinema.

Peter Yates is a director nostalgic about Hollywood. Who could have guessed that he was Richardson's assistant at the time of **A Taste of Honey**? His first film, **Summer Holiday** was a musical comedy in the Associated British tradition, with mediocre choreography but dashed off in a spirited improvised manner. After doing a variation the 'hold-up of the century' theme (**Robbery**), he established his reputation as a virtuoso with the superbly timed chase in **Bullitt**, before surrendering to fashion and making the cosily sentimental **John and Mary** (a premature version of **Love Story**). **Murphy's War** sums up his qualities as a director. Anything to do with spectacular action is well organized, and he also conveys a critical intention in a manner which is clear without being blatant. Silliphant's script is a fine homage to Huston, and he is even more caustic than Huston about the myth of adventure. He puts us on our guard against the type of hero he is showing, but direction and acting are conventional and so miss the point, which makes the result rather ambiguous. It would be difficult to have it otherwise within the

abstract framework of pure action. The battle between the flying-boat and the submarine is a good bravura piece, but it is not until the last ten minutes of the film that one gets a feeling of oppressiveness, when the unease intended by the authors is physically communicated. It is a pity that one has to wait so long.

British superproductions (the tradition stretches back to the sprawling vehicles of Korda's days) are almost unequalled in the vast ambitions of their projects and their no less frequent failure to mitigate their pomposity. What was once only a competitive strategy when the sophisticated resources of the national studios were used to outdo the great Hollywood spectacles (Rank promoted their most expensive productions, from **Caesar and Cleopatra** to **Saraband for Dead Lovers**, by playing on their 'intellectual quality') is now in the present-day cinema a cause for astonishment. Far from vacillating or stooping to the masses of television viewers, the superproductions do not simply contend themselves with carrying on in their role of preserving traditional forms in the face of the faltering efforts of the 'young cinema'. They supplement their visual plethora by an emphasis on the content, whether it be the great romantic dioramas of Lean or the erudite and thought-out historical frescoes like **Becket** or **Cromwell**. A recent, very extravagant Anglo-American production by ABC, James Clavell's **The Last Valley**, makes an all-out play for hyperbole, politico-philosophical allegory and even theological speculation. The dialogue is as over-elaborate and high-flown as in Sidney Pollack's memorable **Castle Keep**, the whole apocalyptic background being topped by similarly grandiose contemporary metaphors. Bearing in mind the crushing aesthetic of the genre, Clavell has done rather well. But can one seriously debate the originality of the underlying intention? It struck me — although I would not swear by it — that it was set on non-humanist co-ordinates aiming at something rather different from Anglo-saxon liberalism. It is definitely agnostic and possibly atheistic. For my own part, I would see in the obscure and farfetched portrait of this 'last' valley, an outpost of civilization surrounded by the European pandemonium of the Thirty Years' War, a metaphor more critical than is apparent on the old myth of insularity — 'this other Eden, demi-paradise; this fortress built by Nature for herself, against infection and the hand of war... this realm, this England.' It would have called for more ample development if the 'message' was not to get lost in the academic style of the direction (superb, if one likes this kind of thing), thereby aggravating the misunderstanding as well as one's perplexity.

5.

Nothing could be more trivial than a film like **Performance**, a good example of scandalously commercial production-line cinema which could just as well have been made in Paris, New York or Copenhagen. A film like this seems to demonstrate that the British cinema liberated itself from the ideological yoke of the middle class (which at least gave it its rare anachronism and the charm of the 'good old days') only to be corrupted by a ravenous modernism catering for snobs and progressives at all cost. Drugs, pop music, group sex and androgyny are the sum total of the liberty allowed in a country whose institutions

continue to function as smoothly as ever. Watching Donald Cammel's film one is only given a complaisant view of permissiveness, while in fact, more than anywhere else, class still governs the behaviour of the individual in Britain. This is what directors like Ken Loach and Platts-Mills, following in the tradition of semi-documentary and Free Cinema, try to present by rendering a social setting with exactitude. Ted Kotcheff would have come closer to realizing this aim in his commendable **Two Gentlemen Sharing**, if he had not ended up, because of the hazy conception and the awkwardness of the execution, with a series of half-truths which travesty his serious intentions. The script by Evan Jones, a former collaborator of Losey (**Eve, King and Country**), provided an unusual and ingenious starting point. The incisive basis of the drama about the life together of two fine specimen of British civilization who set out to attack the notions of elegance, education and refinement (one of them being coloured, although educated at Oxford) could have led to a caustic comedy on the subject of racial integration and indeed, it is almost successful at the beginning. The fault of what follows is that it is too ambitious, even though it remains a fascinating film on the level of intentions. To deal with the sexual implications of racialism and move from the observation of mores to a confrontation between class notions of behaviour would have needed as much political as cinematic mastery of the material, and both are sadly lacking. What remains is an interesting reportage on the life of West Indians in London, including a noteworthy semi-documentary reggae sequence — ten minutes which capture the reality of the people with a rare precision.

6.

One can gauge how far the British cinema has come over the past dozen years by the distance which separates the chief engineer of the abortive renaissance at the end of the fifties from the most prominent and bright representative of the new generation today. **Ned Kelly** is evidence of Tony Richardson's inability to revitalize — even in nineteenth century Australia, even with Mick Jagger — the now dated rebellion of the Angry Young Men. With **The Music Lovers** following after **Women in Love** Ken Russell on the other hand seems intent on demolishing whole centuries of decorum and puritanism. Richardson resigns himself to a classicism which is simply disenchantment, while Russell has invented for himself a riotous and violent style to express his irreverence and iconoclastic rage. He lashes out against romanticism, against women and against the beauty he creates only to destroy it the more furiously. He has something obscure and pathological about him, a quite frightening appetite for ugliness linked to a sort of vague adoration for white-robed silhouettes slipping through the undergrowth. His hate of romanticism is curious — or is it only the reverse of his fixation? — for he loves doing the most beautiful clichés. His obsessions match his talent and he parades them with superb unconcern, indifferent to the disgust they arouse. Both his freedom of expression and his visual excesses are unparalleled in the British cinema. He may yet give it what it has always lacked: formal audacity and a search for style.

translated by Kay Gladstone

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The high level of unemployment among film-technicians, the closure last year of MGM's studios at Boreham Wood, the withdrawal of American finance which had accounted for 90% of British film production in 1969 and the rapid rise and fall of Bryan Forbes as the Head of Production for ABPC are all symptoms of the current crisis in the British Film Industry. What is difficult to decide is if this crisis is exceptional or just one of the series which appear to have dogged the British industry since its birth, making it hard to tell whether the industry's disease is operable or incurable.

In 1926 after the set-back the industry suffered during the First World War and the Americans' capture of much of the European market, British films occupied only 5% of the screen time in this country. In 1932 American films took five million pounds a year from Britain whilst British films only brought in one hundred thousand pounds from America in return. In 1936/7 there was a national production crisis partly as a hang-over from the Depression and in 1941 the two major chains of Gaumont and Odeon Cinemas were put under the same management. Thus the British industry followed a much more irregular pattern of growth than its American counterpart in the pre-war period.

The halcyon forties for the American cinema were the years when many of the difficulties of the British industry became more apparent still. The imposition of the Dalton Duties, a 75% tax on American films imported into Britain at a moment when American had 80% of the British market, resulted in an American embargo on distribution to Britain. The Rank Organisation, which had been trying rather unsuccessfully to export films to America in the immediate post-war years, now made plans to produce some sixty feature films in an effort, together with other British producers, to fill the gap made by the stoppage of American films. In 1948 the British Government came to a compromise with the American industry, setting up a new quota system in return for the withdrawal of the import tax, and as a result the American embargo was lifted. At the very moment when the British production made under these conditions of a forced and hurried expansion reached the screens of the nation, the

Carry on sinking

Chris Mottershead

best of two year's American production arrived in Britain. The native productions could not compete, and in 1948 Rank lost about three-and-a-half million pounds and British Lion some two-and-a-quarter million. The Rank Organisation had its other assets to cushion the loss but British Lion began its slide into bankruptcy. Significantly the Rank Organisation has not ventured into any extensive programme of production since this period.

The eventual fall of British Lion absorbed much of the £5 million which the Government put into its new National Film Finance Corporation set up in 1948 as a self-liquidating fund to aid film producers, for Korda's company was loaned £3 million of it, all of which was eventually lost. It may have been that the sum itself was of scant use in curing the production problems of the industry at that time. This was the view of Nicholas Davenport who resigned from the NFFC in 1949. In a *Daily Mail* article in July, he pointed out the relevant financial details of the previous year:

£112,000,000 Box Office Receipts.

£38,000,000 Entertainment Tax.
£50,000,000 Exhibitors.
£6,000,000 Distributors.

leaving

£19,000,000 of which
£12,000,000 was the American share.
£7,000,000 was the British share.

Yet British films for that year had cost £14 million to produce and had earned only £2 m in exports and so had lost £5 m. Davenport later argued in a *New Statesman* article in 1951 that what the Government should have done was to nationalise British Lion, having lent it so much money, to have used its studios for more independent productions and then to have arranged cheaper distribution facilities and possibly to have moved against the nation-wide booking power of the big circuits. What the Government actually did, he explained, was to lend money to British Lion without controlling it, fail to set up any worthwhile producers with sufficient backing but instead to spend a considerable amount of money on second-feature films which cost too much and finally allow the NFFC to become closely involved with Rank and ABC in 1951.

It can be said though, that since its almost forced involvement with 'British

Lion', the NFFC has in fact played an essential role within Britain by providing 'end-money' for many productions which would otherwise never have been made, for this money was the least likely to be regained from a production since it had last call on possible profits. The Corporation was involved in the production of more than seven hundred features between 1949 and 1970 and lost only some £2m out of an investment of £27m, if the loan to British Lion is discounted. Such a performance must be regarded as successful within its own terms, since the NFFC has always been bound to try to operate commercially and in such a high-risk financial area.

The fifties saw the increasing decline of cinema audiences, the closure of cinemas, especially as a result of the merger and rationalisation of the Gaumont and Odeon chains by Rank in 1958, and a further fall in production because of this loss of cinema outlets for new films. Protests about the lack of distribution possibilities for independent films led to the setting up of the Monopolies Commission which reported in 1966. The Report pointed out the drop in production of long films (over 72 mins) from peak of 96 in 1957 to 69 in 1965 and of short films (33½ — 72 mins) from 45 to 28 in 1960 and only 22 in 1965. It found that a film needed a booking on one of the two major circuits for any hope of success and that distributors were unwilling to show a film unless they could get such a booking. The fact that the cinemas of both chains were large resulted in a policy of booking only films which would have a mass appeal and therefore denying minority films any outlet. The Commission concluded that:

'...production is effectively determined by the policies of only two companies without the check of competition. Admittedly we have no reason to think that they do not act conscientiously and seek to meet what they believe to be the public demand. But the public's taste cannot be anticipated, and we believe that the public would be better served by a freer market.' (par. 230)

The Commission could recommend little beyond asking the two circuits to give assurances that they would be more flexible in their pattern of booking in future.

In the sixties, production received the

impetus of greater American finance, drawn amongst other reasons by the lower production costs in Britain than in America, but much of this money seems to have been halted by the current recession in the American economy.

The recent history of production in Britain seems to have been greatly influenced by the changes in the American industry, especially by the run-down of studios by the major companies and their concentration more on distribution and on leasing studios to independent producers than on making a continuous series of their own films. Lower costs in England, together with the absence of language problems, were among factors which attracted American money in the sixties but this supply now seems to have contracted, perhaps because many of the major companies have suffered changes of management whereby they have been absorbed by organisations with wider interests who operate on more conventional business bases. When a long-established film giant like 20th Century Fox can lose more than £50 million in the past two years it may be that nobody is safe.

In so far as the Government has intervened in the affairs of the industry, since the last war, it appears that the abolition of the Entertainment Tax, the setting up of the NFFC and the introduction of Eady Money have acted as some encouragement to producers to continue working in Britain in order to keep film workers employed, and possibly also to prevent the need to import all the films shown by such encouragement. Such a policy could be called one of minimum intervention in the workings of the industry. If the Government had at any time since the war really desired to foster the industry, however, it ought to have considered the structure of the industry much more closely. Failure to do this led to the embarrassment of 1947/48 when the capabilities of the industry were grossly over-rated. Failure to appreciate the implications of the growing control over the circuits by the two major companies made it difficult or impossible to stimulate independent British production later on.

As more cinemas were closed, the demand for feature films became less, since the pattern of the two major chains was to retain a limited number of feature films for widespread showing in order to get maximum value from current publicity — thus the two chains may well show one film in all of their respective cinemas north of the river one week, followed by a showing of the same film in all their cinemas south of the river the following week.

At the time of the Rank rationalisation, American companies already supplied about seventy films per year, and Michael Balcon points out in *A Lifetime of Films* that American finance in companies with which the two major chains were associated effectively controlled much of the production of the remaining thirty odd films required to complete the circuits' programmes. Thus the closures meant a contraction in the annual de-

mand for films of almost one third and it was in this area that the likely chances for independent productions had previously existed.

It could be argued that the hold exercised over production by the two major chains was no bad thing in a contracting industry provided that they supplied the public with what it wanted. Yet of the thirty-nine most popular British-made films in the years 1957-62, twenty eight were independently produced. Balcon stresses that films have to be financed on a revolving fund, whereby future credit is based on the returns from films already made. Because of the number of cinemas owned by the two major chains or associated with them, distributors are reluctant to handle a film unless it can obtain a booking with the major chains, and are prepared to hold a film for some time until such a booking is available. Yet all the time that the film is on the shelf waiting to be shown it is building up heavy interest charges on the money borrowed to produce it, whilst the lack of any direct returns prevents the producers from embarking on future work. In May 1970 it is estimated that about one hundred feature films were waiting for a showing.

Hopes for any form of stronger Government intervention in the industry seem scant when the present Government has recently decided to reverse the decision of its predecessor in funding the NFFC with a further £5 million; instead the NFFC has now virtually to depend on raising capital from private sources if it is to continue. Such a withdrawal of Government interest is at the opposite pole from the position of the ACTT, the union most involved on the technical production of films in Britain, which has put forward a policy of nationalising part of the industry to form a state corporation with production, distribution and exhibition facilities.

Certainly without the help provided by the NFFC and perhaps more importantly by the British Film Fund during the fifties and sixties, Independent production would have been hard hit. The British Film Fund, or 'Eady Money', was introduced in 1950, financed by a levy on cinema seats for all films shown in Britain. The money raised by this levy was then to be redistributed to British films proportional to their box office returns, whereby successful films would draw greater subsidy, presumably in the hope of promoting future commercial successes. Since the amount of Eady Money often equals what would be the distributors' commission and expenses, usually a minimum of 25% of takings, it may well make the difference between outright profit or loss for a producer. Yet the system has benefited American producers as much possibly as English ones, for provided a large proportion of the labour cost goes to British crews the film will qualify for Eady Money even though its capital may come from America or elsewhere.

So far, attention has been directed to the structure of the industry, but clearly other and more imponderable factors than

economics are involved in the way in which film production in Britain has developed, determinants such as cultural patterns, the possible availability of talent and the methods of production.

Whatever the relative importance in the development of the industry of such factors, however, it is clear that the film industry is changing internationally today, and nowhere more so than in America, where the production side of the major companies seems to have been dropped in favour of their distribution interests, with the companies reliant upon independent package deals to provide them with films. Cost is no longer proportional to success, if it ever was, for a popular success such as *Paint Your Wagon* is unlikely to produce a profit, whereas *Woodstock* cost several hundred thousand dollars but has grossed thirty or forty times its cost. In the face of changing demand, the British industry still seems very uncertain as to how it will react.

The monolithic system of distribution and exhibition is undoubtedly the major stumbling block to flexibility because of its presumption of the old unitary mass audience, with the consequent denial of any range of choice for viewers. If independent production is to flourish it may need to invest less, because of the risks, and to be sure of a swift, if modest, return, which the present system of 'all or nothing' distribution cannot provide for more than a few films. Possible new commercial ways of financing films are outlined in an article in 'Investors Chronicle' for August 6th 1971, including a possible major review of the whole distribution with Eady money, international and tv rights whereby revenues might be pooled and divided in such a way as to ensure that all parties made at least some money from the moment that a film begins to be shown. Other sources of finance might be from money currently spent on advertising, or from companies who hope to break free from the patterns of lavish spending historically associated with the film industry by dispensing with such things as expensive publicity or West End showings. Paradoxically though, one of the problems of 'selling' a film appears to be the reliance the general public still attaches to a West End showing as some sort of seal of approval.

More radical solutions favour the creation of independent cinemas, direct distribution by the film makers or some similar pattern for taking films to their intended audience. As an 'alternative solution' such schemes may well have small-scale success but if they were to aim at reaching a large audience, then presumably some sizeable organisation would have to be created, even if it were not aimed at profit-making beyond covering costs.

What remains to be seen however is if the commercial industry does prove willing to become more flexible — will there be the talent for film making waiting to emerge in Britain.

The Go-Between

The Go-Between. GB 1971 Dir Joseph Losey Sc Harold Pinter, after *The Go-Between* by L P Hartley Phot Gerry Fischer Mus Michel Legrand Cast Julie Christie (Marian) Alan Bates (Ted Burgess) Margaret Leighton (Mrs Maudsley) Dominic Guard (Leo) Edward Fox (Hugh Trimmingham) Michael Gough (Mr Maudsley) Michael Redgrave (Colston) Prod MGM-EMI (116 min)

Experience teaches that to live with any degree of awareness means to choose, and to assume responsibility for one's choices. But contrary to what pragmatic empiricism upholds, one chooses not individual acts or beliefs to act upon, but with them larger contexts in which these acts inscribe themselves, and whether one likes it or not, it is the way such contexts constitute themselves into objective systems that gives the choices their meaning. It may take a lifetime to find out just what the exact lines of force are in the systems to which one has committed oneself. And where a moral or intellectual commitment has supplanted the spontaneous re-enacting of prejudices handed down by one's education, personal identity can become a tightrope, held taut by the past and strung out into the future. On such a tightrope Leo Colston, the narrator of *The Go-Between* seems to be walking.

Losey, in a good many of his films likes to draw the lesson that spontaneity is often not the exercise of freedom, but simply the painful ignorance about the deeper emotional and social determinants which generate their own dynamics of creativity and obsession within the individual. Films like *M*, *Time Without Pity*, *Blind Date* or *King and Country* are concerned with the way a man unwittingly, and yet in retrospect necessarily, entangles himself in different social and private worlds which seem at first to have nothing to do with him, but nonetheless fatally exhaust his strength or destroy his life. Throughout his work, furthermore, Losey has been interested in the worlds within worlds, and his later films trace the properly ideological fabric into which a subjective intelligence is woven. Inevitably, once aware of itself between these worlds, this intelligence experiences life as exile.

From the opening shot, with Colston's voice over saying 'the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there', *The Go-Between* (as the title suggests) makes the coexistence of different worlds and the sense of being exiled its dominant theme. The ostensible subject — taken from the L P Hartley novel — is the loss or spontaneity and innocence through an act of adult selfishness. Leo, a sensitive and intelligent boy of thirteen becomes the accomplice in the desperate and therefore ruthless love-affair between Marian, daughter of a Norfolk country gentleman and Ted, the robust farmer who works part of the Maudsley estate. In love with Marian himself, Leo consents to being their messenger boy, but in the event he has to compromise the Maudsleys whose guest he is and betray the lovers. The double breach of loyalty, as much as the confrontation with

the sexual act under 'archetypal' circumstances (the couple are in some ways Leo's substitute parents) has a traumatizing effect, and in the inserted flash-forward scenes Leo appears as a stiff, reserved bachelor visiting the 'country of the past' at Marian's request.

Several aspects must have attracted Losey to the subject. There is the theme of intrusion: Leo is a visitor at Brandham Hall rather like Anna is a visitor at Oxford in *Accident*. Both introduce a new element into a network of human relationships which respond to this intrusion, in both films to produce fatal results. One remembers the Dirk Bogarde figure in *The Sleeping Tiger* or Robert Mitchum's role in *Secret Ceremony*, and one realizes how much the visitor as intruder has been a constant feature in Losey's work, already present before he collaborated with Pinter (who prefers similar patterns, e.g. *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*). It is furthermore a theme that links Losey with one of the chief dramatic devices of Hollywood, where the solitary outsider so often is the dynamic agent whose intervention forced the community to reveal itself.

In *The Go-Between*, however, the emphasis is not so much on the way the intruder accelerates or catalyzes by his presence the natural momentum of the configuration, he appears more as the reflective recipient (not to say victim) of the different stages in the equilibrium and disequilibrium of the Maudsley household, which is going through a latent crisis. From the moment Marian takes Leo to Norwich, he is being used, manipulated, a pawn in a game he is unable to comprehend. The crisis is primarily an emotional one (Marian is forced to marry a man she does not love), but Losey defines it also in terms of a class-conflict and a clash of life-styles. Beneath the domestic crisis we sense an imminent historical change: by taking literally the metaphor of the 'Edwardian summer' which came to an end in 1914, Losey revitalizes the cliché with a more directly thematic symbolism. Also, the characters talk about war and mean the Boer war but the audience readily associates World War One. 'Do you think this is the end of the summer?' Leo asks Marian on the morning of his birthday as the storm-clouds draw up, and it is as if since that day the rainy season had never stopped for Colston.

Because it is conceived as a sustained reminiscence punctuated by flash-forwards in which a Biblical wind bloweth where it listeth, the film quite naturally amplifies the portrait of a historical period and a social class with the subjective dimension of an individual consciousness, recalling a particularly painful

and vivid childhood experience. The narrative form thus directly suggests the subjective-objective nexus in which the story is cast (an important change from book to film), and in order to mark the peculiar intensity of memory Losey constantly uses the evidence of a hot summer to play on the ambiguities of light, heat and brilliance. ('You flew too near the sun and you got scorched' the narrator comments as Leo is sitting next to Marian on the coach to Norwich).

In one sense, Leo's presence is an intrusion into an essentially closed world provoking it to make explicit its behaviour, attitudes, and self-understanding. Subjectively, however, it is also an initiation — another Losey theme since *The Boy With the Green Hair*, *The Big Night* up to *Figures in a Landscape*. Leo undergoes a threefold rite of passage into the adult world: a different social milieu (the middle class boy getting his first taste of upper class mores as he is ceremoniously led to the dinner table by the hostess), a new emotional awareness (the feeling of love and the secrets of sex), and entry into a world of moral ambiguity about right and wrong, and the mental anguish of conflicting loyalties.

On a dramatic level, the double movement of intrusion and initiation provides the inner dialectic of the film, and the subjective-objective 'polarity' (which is a unity on a deeper level) articulates the individual parts into a consecutive narrative flow. The introductory prologue illustrates this very well. Leo is led into the house and up the stairs to his friend's room, but at every opportunity he looks out of the window onto the lawn, the croquet game, he glimpses Marian in her hammock, or sees the father waving to them from the park. To penetrate into Brandham Hall is literally and metaphorically to have different vantage points from which to observe other worlds outside, and the scene is constructed in such a way that there is an immediate sense of inner complexity (the angles at which the interior, the staircase, the landings are framed) offset by the seemingly idyllic vistas leading the eye to project itself beyond — a thematic conjunction of distance and desire, proximity and emotional turmoil, which the film develops in the direction of a dualism between the need to belong and the awareness of being excluded, in short, the dilemma that the voyeur shares with the exile.

The movement is continued when the boys leave the house to go into the garden, for here one has an 'objective' view of Leo, the boys in the middle distance, Marian in the foreground, with the sense of intrusion conveyed by the voice over (one of Marian's admirers) reading to her from a novel and suddenly interrupting himself to ask 'who's that?'. Cut to the boys on their way to the outhouses, and Marcus voicing Leo's subjective thoughts by saying 'my sister is very beautiful'. Finally, a medium shot of Leo followed by a counter shot of Marian in close-up completes the exposition: Losey conceives his narrative strictly in accordance with the emotional logic of the themes, ensuring that every thematically important moment has its double articulation — a subjective vision (Leo's consciousness in action and evolution) confronting the objective existence of worlds outside this vision — mediated by the ordering intelligence of the camera, which never breaks

the continuity of a universe at once visibly created, instantly present and reflected upon.

It would be superfluous to show how this principle throughout the film regulates the narrative rhythm, with its temps morts, its digressions, repetitions and final acceleration, and determines the montage (the way Losey suggests subjective time in the scene where Leo catches the ball, without having recourse to slow-motion is in itself worth a detailed study) — suffice it to say that it also allows him, in the most classical manner, to frame for instance a threshold, doors, gates, open fields or a straight country lane so as to chart minutely the stages in Leo's exploration of the moral and emotional terrain vague around him and within him. A haystack becomes the summit of exultation and the vantage point of boundless freedom, from which Leo-Mercury-Icarus lets himself fall in abandon, to be brought back to reality with the sharp pain of an injury that will leave his sensibility scarred for life; and the bark of an oak somewhere in the Norfolk countryside conveys the harsh truth of another tree of knowledge about a suffering and misery that nothing can mitigate. Perhaps it is this sense of the concrete, communicating in the very feel and texture of phenomena the universals of a cultural heritage and the recurrent crises of emotional life that gives Losey's film a place, paradoxically, not within the British cinema (where he is a towering isolated figure) but in the larger perspective of English literary and poetic tradition. And this is not only because the book from which the film is taken is something of a modern classic. Partly, Losey's own ethical outlook — which has always focussed (where his films did not describe desperate struggles for psychological, sexual and social supremacy over others, as in *Eve*, or *The Servant*) on the tragically wasteful effort of discovering one's moral identity and preserve one's self-respect at the price of emotional barrenness and self-denial — is a very 'British' one, and in the mainstream of English literature, especially amongst its foreigners (close to the ironic stoicism of Conrad, in fact).

More directly, however, the phenomenological realism that Losey has retained from his Hollywood background, which works by gesture and inflexion, and depends as much on the turn of a head as on the turn of a phrase, has been (in its literary equivalent) the customary domain of the English realist novel and the strength of English poetic diction since the Romantics. It is the particular achievement of what is generally meant by the Great Tradition, for it implies a certain belief in the stability as well as the transparency of modes and codes of behaviour, a belief in the existence of a social life — intact, functioning, normative and formative alike on a variety of distinct social levels, and thus presupposing a degree of national identity, a consensus of values and objectives, where discrepancies in behaviour and pretention, lapses of language and intonation could be interpreted as a reliable guide to an individual's background and mentality, and where the social and linguistic performance of a person was a conclusive index to his intentions. It meant that no inner life, no mental reality, existed which could not be made manifest through behavioural or linguistic mimesis.



The harsh truth of another tree of knowledge (*The Go-Between*)

These assumptions Losey acknowledges at the same time as he turns them inside out, by relativizing their historical and aesthetic validity. *The Go-Between*, above all, defines bourgeois social life as socializing ritual, and the country house with its pursuits of leisure as a field-exercise in upper-class ideology. The oblique angle under which the Maudsleys are viewed — oblique both because seen through Leo, the outsider, and because within the flow of ordinary life, the summer holiday clearly assumes the nature of an interlude — exposes how church-going, cricket, the village fête or even bathing are demonstrations of class-solidarity and lessons in class-consciousness. A trespasser, does one chase him off or put him at his ease? A school cap just isn't worn at a private match, a gentleman cricketer (which Ted is not) doesn't bat in such a way as to endanger the ladies, and it's slightly more in order to call someone Trimmingham than Mr Trimmingham if he is also a Viscount.

In all this Pinter is surely for something — a dramatist who in his own work has been undermining

the positivist assumptions that ordinary language is the measure of all valid thought, and who has traced the rough edges of banal and every day conversation, pointing up the crack and gaps where it gives way to another reality altogether. Thus a Pinter line of dialogue is as maliciously trimmed with the grotesque fringes from the civilities of social discourse as a Losey track or pan may be subtly revelatory of fundamental contradiction in the smooth tissue of a visual surface. The projects on which they have collaborated, in addition, seem to reflect a major predilection — to create situations where a certain reality, however preposterous it may seem to an outside observer is nevertheless accepted by the protagonists at face value. As they are vainly struggling within their limited awareness to make sense of the only kind of life they know, that limited conception of reality is dialectically shown to have its own justification, if only in that it confers a certain remote rectitude and stature to those thus failing.

A particularly moving example of such irony is

the smoking room episode. Responding to Leo's baffled question about sexual fidelity, Trimmingham bends forward with impeccable composure to pronounce the secret cross borne by the men of his class — that 'a lady is never at fault': both Leo and he have been betrayed by Marian, yet somehow each is only dimly aware of the pain inflicted upon the other. That Trimmingham can bear his burden with equanimity obviously indicates a heroic dignity of sorts, but it also explains why Marian would feel the need to be unfaithful or reject him altogether. Sexuality is her only means of rebelling against a social order which in the realm of personal relationships at least, crucifies both men and women. In the same scene a remark falls about Ted having a woman up these parts. 'I know' says Leo, 'but she doesn't come on Sundays', thinking of Ted's char. The men show an indulgent, slightly pained smile. But the irony is of course that despite Leo being the victim of a semantic confusion which makes him look ridiculous and naive, he knows more about Ted's 'woman' than either Trimmingham or Mr. Maudsley.

At times Pinter's dialogues seem merely to furnish with quaint phrases the different worlds created by Losey's mise-en-scene, like the period bric-a-brac that fills the rooms of the house. The public-school slang between the boys, the quips about ladies being catered rather than seized, or Trimmingham having been 'gored by the Boers' are arabesques decorating however a quite solid thematic architecture: the language of the Maudsleys gives a recognizable value to the things that surround them and which they dominate, yet it also protects them from life outside, and it ultimately hides them from each other. They assume it as a code — to define and defend themselves against every manner of intrusion. Thus, the different linguistic worlds are brought into sharp contrast by Losey not only to give expression to the poignant inadequacies of language in the effort towards emotional adulthood (Leo's difficulties when trying to grasp the reality behind the word 'spooning' and Ted's final 'mind you get it told right'), but to draw attention to the whole process of naming as a way of appropriating reality, with its inherent distortion of experience: Losey lets no false nostalgia subsist about Edwardian idylls, for Marian's closing words to Leo Colston about the affair having been a thing of beauty are unmasked by the film as the gross insensitivity of a person used to dispose over words and people alike. In Marian's world Colston is a man robbed of his own experience, because there seems no language in which he could affirm it. Almost always seen from behind glass and windows or enveloped in a rainy mist, he inhabits a subaquatic world of silence.

It is here that Losey undercuts most clearly the assumptions of L. P. Hartley's original: the character of Colston, all bitter-stoic resignation to an empty life and choking on his memories, belongs in his Wordsworthian preference for enjoying feelings through contemplation (or quietly suffering them) — as Adorno has said of an Aldous Huxley hero — 'to the sentential standbys of the modern English novel'. In comparison with the book, Losey has not only reduced the presence of Colston, but changed his function, making him the furtive shadow looming

ahead of, and so to speak, 'rising to meet' the actual Leo of thirteen 'at evening', rather than the reflecting and thereby dominating narrator. Instead the controlling function falls unambiguously to the camera, for by weaving the dualism of subjective and objective points of view into a cinematic unity where one perspective comments and interprets the other, and by showing that the worlds existing side by side are essentially closed, Losey achieves a perspective with a different depth, in a process of distanciation which allows him to reinterpret critically the moral position of his characters and his own aesthetic position as the director. Because the action is seen from Leo's point of view, the camera shares with Leo the stance of an outsider. — but on the far side of Leo's subjective involvement. The result is a complex aesthetic relativism, by which Losey is able to comment on the limits of his own mise-en-scene.

At first glance, the classical style that relies on 'pars pro toto' symbols and a metaphoric use of setting, landscape and incident is especially convincing where it is used to represent those aspects of bourgeois mentality that bear an affinity to such a style: the cult of objects, for example, treasured not for their aesthetic qualities or practical uses, but for their 'sentimental' value, is an act of symbolization in daily life which has its direct equivalent in the cinema when an object figuring in the action later reappears to take on a special meaning by virtue of its previous context. Leo's bathing suit, because of its association with Marian, or Ted's bloody handkerchief are such symbolic objects overcharged with emotional significance. Similarly, the fact that the Maudsleys' style of life is an expression of breeding and 'nurture' transmitted and exercised through repetition in social and family life, seems to confirm a resolute anti-naturalism (in the sense that it does not tolerate the contingent, just as it frowns upon spontaneous manifestations of emotion), which on the level of style (and stylization) makes a tree not just a tree and rain more than a meteorological phenomenon.

The analogies and parallelisms which can be drawn between the closed social situation which the film depicts and the equally 'closed' symbolic style where nothing is random, perhaps explain why there is a sense that something is hollow at the core of the film, or rather, that there is a very strong (and it seems to me intentional) feeling of absence created: we are aware of another reality, which if we knew it would restore our balance as spectators, but which Losey never shows and the Maudsleys as a matter of course would not and could not acknowledge as existing. And that reality is evidently Marian and Ted's affair seen 'from outside'. Only when Mrs Maudsley, still wearing her paper hat, seizes Leo by the sleeve and drags him out into the pouring rain to surprise the lovers in the act, does she break 'form', in the same sense as the film at the end breaks its form, and would have broken its form had it, say, shown Ted talking to his charwoman or had attempted to explain what the affair was 'really' like. And this is not only because in order to be consistent, Losey could in any case show no more than what Leo himself had witnessed, but because these things,



The Edwardian Summer coming to an end
(*The Go-Between*)

within the framework that the film sets itself, belong to a different (dis-)order of reality. That is also why Ted's suicide is a dramatic and metaphoric, rather than a psychological necessity, and why seeing Ted and Marian together in the hay-loft is precisely timed to produce a traumatic (but for the spectator also cathartic) climax. The sudden acceleration, with frayed tempers at the birthday party, the growing tension of Mrs Maudsley, the thunderstorm, the sense of an almost apocalyptic disaster, which fragments the narrative at the end into a series of explosive flashes, results from a perfect convergence of style and theme: the forces of sex explode the Maudsleys' world, while the direct representation of the sexual act makes the process of 'symbolization' redundant: repression of sexuality created the void in Colston's life, but its emergence in his childhood destroys the magic universe of innocent sublimation, which is indeed also universe of art. Knowledge, Losey seems to be saying — as in so many of his films — is always accompanied by loss and a diminution of creativity.

Looked at from its subjective point of reminiscence, *The Go-Between* is Leo's fiction, a 'fable of identity' between the intuition of what he might have been to himself and what he knows to be to others, which Losey shows in action, in contradiction and also in collusion with the wider circles of ideological fictions that hold social and personal life together in time. To the question of who Leo Colston finally is, the film gives a dialectical answer: identity is a constant effort against the forces of disintegration, but

it is an ambiguous achievement, because of what it excludes, the rigour it imposes, the possibilities it has to negate, the potential it leaves unfulfilled. As an attitude to life it is the sign of a modern, emancipated and thoroughly sceptical puritanism, pushed to the point where moral integrity and personal dignity cannot but appear as slightly absurd and indeed eccentric.

Losey's mastery of the fluid transitions between Leo's and the Maudsleys' points of view is thus made possible by the fact that both still belong essentially to the same world, and furthermore, both live on the assumption (which the film disproves) that they have control over their environment — Leo by his magic and the Maudsleys by their social status. The dialectic of subjective-objective vision operates between a voyeur whose desire it is to belong, be part of, and a world which either ignores him or merely lectures him on its own absolute standards — not between the rebel opposing his own vision of reality to the temptations of a form of life as beautiful and deadly as an atropa belladonna growing in a decay which is almost wilderness again. Leo, outsider and a child, is in no position to develop his own form of revolt, and he, like the Maudsleys, 'cannot bear much reality'.

If there is therefore good reason why the contingent has no room in Brandham Hall and ultimately none in the life of Leo Colston — what about Losey's mise-en-scene, can it do more than exorcise it with the magic of style, can it accommodate a non-symbolic image of the world and still communicate something? In *Figures in a Landscape*, that much underrated 'experimental' film, Losey tried to fuse, with an extraordinary audaciousness in the handling of the narrative continuity, the virtues of a 'closed' psychological situation (two men on the run and therefore dependent on each other) with a sense of indeterminacy (the sudden interruption of action in the ambush on the power station and the appearance of soldiers out of nowhere) designed to throw the situation open — but it makes the film extremely difficult to decipher. Certainly apart from *Figures*, Losey has shown a consistent preference for depicting closed social or psychological situations, and no doubt this is partly why a man with left-wing sympathies and intelligence is as an artist profoundly attached to the 'style', rituals and fictions of the British bourgeoisie, who from a certain level upward is still the most cohesive and 'insular' national bourgeoisie anywhere. Losey escapes from insularity — like all highly self-aware artists — by setting up the mirrors of reflection within his own work.

The strength of *The Go-Between* is therefore precisely that it is also a meditation about the freedom and restriction of a cinematic form, in the way its fictional procedure, its treatment of consciousness, time and reality constantly emphasizes the limits and restrictions of the world it depicts and affirms the existence of other worlds in marking the boundaries of this one. By thinking so clearly the limits of his own cinema, Losey has in a sense already transcended them, and after such a Kantian exercise, the cinema seems ready for its Hegel.

Private Road

Private Road GB 1971 Dir Barney Platts-Mills Sc B P M
Pr Andrew St John Phot Adam Barker-Mill Mus G Fenton
M Feast D Dundas Ed Jonathan Gili Cast Susan Penhaligon
(Ann Halpern) Bruce Robinson (Peter Morissey) Michael
Feast (Stephen) George Fenton (Henry) Prod Maya Films
(59 min)

There are sometimes after all opportunities that are almost not in accord with the general situation, opportunities in which by means of a word, a glance, a sign of trust, more can be achieved than by means of lifelong exhausting efforts. Indeed that is how it is. But, then again, of course, these opportunities are in accord with the general situation in so far as they are never made use of. But why then are they never made use of? I ask time and again. **Kafka** The Castle

Fortunately it is just not possible to write a review of **Private Road**. What follows is both less than that and more. For too many other things are involved. The posture of the reviewer rests on many doubtful assumptions: a determination to ignore or to dispose of as ancillary the privileged or disadvantaged position of the work in terms of the financial or artistic resources available for its realisation, to concentrate on the experience offered in all its immediacy, to sample it as merely one among many possible and potential experiences. It is to postulate the visibility of something whose existence is highly problematic: 'the British Cinema' and to render invisible the mechanisms and institutions that are involved in the sponsoring, financing, distributing — even criticising — of filmic merchandise. For British culture is a quite unique and extraordinary perpetual motion machine dedicated to the fostering, retraining and replacement of its traditional elites; it offers opportunities, encouragement and support to those who are already well established and reserves its highest honours and accolades for dedicated mediocrity, faithful careerism and unrelenting respectability. It would be singularly naive to assume that to write say, a favourable review of **Private Road**, could constitute a significant gesture in the direction of encouraging the art of the film, when that art is already so much encouraged. In speaking of **Private Road** it seems necessary to think of it in terms of the opportunity it presented. It is easy to oscillate between extremes: between being pathetically grateful that it is there at all and deploring it as a reckless waste of hard-to-get, expensive celluloid. How would you review a film if you could only have one?

Of course that is to put the matter rather too drastically. **Private Road** is only one way out of the British cinematic cul-de-sac. But how many other roads are there going to be? Who will build them and who will travel them? And who, practically, needs **Private Road** to the point of travelling to Notting Hill to see it? Actually, not many people. And the more seriously we take **Private Road** the more it becomes part of the problem, an obstacle in the way of a recognition of the gravity of the situation.

Private Road signifies little in either financial or artistic terms; it just happens to be conveniently there as documentary evidence that can be filed away for future reference in that rather empty dossier, hopefully entitled 'The British Cinema'. There has always been some sort of proof of the existence of a British cinema which is why one has never needed to exist. **Private Road** is a kind of celebration of its own impossibility — and for a cinema magazine that exists even when it has no right to exist it would seem only natural to hail a movie that is in the same position. Both in their own distinct and improbable way constitute part of the evidence for a British film culture which barely exists and which is virtually smothered to death by idleness, complacency, apathy. It is this situation that needs reviewing and not **Private Road**.

Who is responsible? Basically the distributors and the handful of people who monopolised such power, privilege and patronage as there was, who kept a tight grip over the directorial assignments, who, since they had no talent, never regarded it as sufficient qualification for entry. In the brief heyday of swinging British cinema it was easy to believe that Betty Box and Ralph Thomas were phantasms from a bad dream; but they were no less real than Bryan Forbes and Richard Attenborough. From an early date the British cinema formed a conception of its own destiny. In England we were to have neither an art cinema nor a genuinely popular cinema, a bodying forth of the clichéd and blinkered conception of the world of Britain's governing elites, a faithful reflection of their smugness and endemic philistinism. The vaunted realism it exhibited, its preoccupation with the nuances of class was quite simply propaganda; a pious hope that what already existed would, must go on existing. It was a didactic, patronising class that disdained both art and its audience, that displayed the same insensitivity of tone, the indifference to context, that maintained the same inflexible, imperturbable wavelength as a Gaumont British news, or a BBC announcer. It was not a matter of giving people what they wanted, let alone honesty or truth but of telling them what it would be advisable for them to hear. Thus the indoctrination, the propaganda, the shameless lying of World War II, was merely the finest hour of British elite culture, its most worthwhile opportunity to practice its métier; and the socially necessary myth of the War, set forth in Wyler's **Mrs Miniver**, of a laying aside of class differences in the face of a common enemy became the axiomatic assumption that 'class' should be deemed to have ceased to exist in theory, while con-



IBM Firepower (**Private Road**)

tinuing indispensably in practise. The cinema was an agent of mystification and also of its own self-perpetuation. For the British cinema need never be anything other than what it already was. **Doctor in the House** and **The Angry Silence**, **Carry On Camping** and **Young Winston**; these are its alpha and omega, the whole gamut of British emotion from A to B. In Britain the notion that capitalism was entrepreneurial and risk-taking has never been taken very seriously; full acknowledgement has always been given to the virtues of the monopoly and the cartel, the inestimable benefit of having the market completely sewn up. The question of an alternative cinema has simply never reached the agenda.

Thus, the dilemma of **Private Road**, and of any any film which originates outside the central control apparatus is that it is subject to Catch 22: which is that it can only vindicate its own existence, only indicate the viability of an alternative cinema by reaching a large popular audience, though this opportunity is denied it by virtue of the fact that it is not part of the existing institutional set up. Platt-Mills' earlier film

has not yet covered its costs and it seems unlikely that **Private Road** will fare any better. The interest of **Private Road** is that it tacitly acknowledges this superfluity, this objective irrelevance and makes it into its subject.

Private Road broaches two main themes: the attempt of a writer to become 'successful', his relationship with a girl from a comfortably off, respectable, bourgeois background. It is therefore very much in the main tradition of the British cinema in recent years, where the hero, typically, sought acceptance and recognition from those socially superior to him, while at the same time reserving the right to reject and mock their values and pretensions. The difference is that Platts-Mills seems ultimately to recognise that neither of these themes is worth exploring, and the picture, in its vacillation between them, in the very detachment and neutrality with which they are treated, emerges as a parody of the whole genre, though this is not altogether its intention. It would have been easy for him to portray Peter Morrissey; the 'brilliant young writer' as an angry

rebel, railing against an uncomprehending literary establishment which will not publish his novels. Of course it is a mistake to describe him as brilliant when we can have no evidence for it — a writer should always be 'a writer' and nothing more — and his earnings from 'Women's Own' are absurd, but Platts-Mills does at least see that his writer is essentially a conformist and that his attempts to earn money from the power of his pen are only different in degree from his work in advertising and not, as it might appear, fundamentally opposed. It is simply that there is a use for commercials plugging a pudding for dogs but not for 'old-fashioned' novels. Publishing, like the British cinema, can use what it can make use of; it specialises in presenting a mélange of commercial, fashionable and covertly ideological prejudices as aesthetically grounded value judgements. Anything which has not been specifically designed to intersect in this particular conjuncture, like Morrissey's novel, like Platts-Mills' film; anything that is gratuitous, that was written or made because somebody wanted to, necessarily falls short of what is demanded because it does not actively work to propagate existing illusions. It is strangely limp. Its work rate is low. Up to a point, of course this serves as a positive recommendation. ('It is a relief, of course, to get away from generation-gap posturing... to a film which suggests that its characters would like to be left alone to work things out, and to stare when they want to at the river', 'Sight and Sound').

But *Private Road*'s very lack of conviction, its presentation of 'making it' as merely one pit-fall laden option, cannot but be slightly subversive.

Peter's friend Stephen, who has dropped out and who works for British Railways simply to get money, clearly leads a less compromised existence. We recognise that the problems which Peter creates for himself are largely the result of his own confused motivations. He is already part of straight society because its imperatives always figure prominently in his mind. Peter is a cipher and the justification of the final scene of the film, whimsical as it is, is that it effectively deflates his pretensions. Peter is put in a situation where he has to help Stephen steal an electric typewriter from an office. Stephen steals it for him: as an emblem of his commitment to writing, which he has given up while in the advertising agency. Yet as a symbol the expensive typewriter quite transcends its ostensible function: what it conveys is the genuineness of Stephen's feeling for Peter, but the actual absurdity of the ambitions it is designed to implement. Stephen's gesture we feel is more significant than any novel which the typewriter could be used on. Again, our inability to relate the technological firepower of the IBM golfball to the actual process of composition suggests the absurdity of the object itself, the distortion of values and priorities which it represents. The ending validates itself because it does not provide a magical solution but serves as a comment, casting retrospective doubt on everything that has gone before. Stephen has actually understood Peter very well: writing a novel equals an electric typewriter. All the intimations of the picture collapse into this simple recognition.

On the whole the picture exemplifies very well

the characteristic strength and weaknesses of the British cinema. On the one hand there is the eye for detail, the attempt to get specifics right, the loving care with which nuances of speech, dress and behaviour are rendered; on the other the strange inability to get any kind of subject into focus, to make the central characters into meaningful centres of attention, to convey a sense of verisimilitude that is anything more than skin deep. And in Platts-Mills, too, there is the tendency to let an audience take away from the picture whatever it wants to, which is a serious fault. In this respect there are a number of parallels with a director like John Schlesinger. Schlesinger has a good eye for backgrounds and for surface appearances. One of the few merits of *Midnight Cowboy* was its readiness to put on film parts of the USA that are seldom shown. On the other hand Schlesinger never honestly confronts the facts of a class society and its values: his treatment invariably glamourises what it ostensibly deplores. The romantic phoniness of the British cinema, of which Schlesinger is representative, was never fully recognised because of its earnest air of social realism and its decor of factory chimneys. British cinema in the sixties could always have its cake and eat it: gesticulate in horror at the rat race and gloat over its rewards, yet affectionately celebrate the tranquil idylls from it when the hero was 'truly happy'. The American cinema has always been more honest in its preoccupation with the mystique of success and was therefore also capable of honestly repudiating it, in a movie like *Mister Cory*. Yet it is possibly surprising to see how little contemporary relevance the British genre of rat-race vs idyll actually had, how few changes in British society were actually reflected there. The fact is that at that time, marginal figures like the working class hero, the social climber and misfit were already an irrelevance, part of the mythology, because the really significant feature was the emergence or growth of self-conscious social groups, whether mods or rockers or art students or graduates or whatever, and who consequently were not poised in tragic isolation between one class and another. Yet the trials and tribulations of these marginal individuals served as the strongest possible argument for maintaining the status quo.

What emerges from this, is that it is precisely the surface 'realism' of the British cinema, its preoccupation with behaviour, with the signals that differentiate one class or sub-class from another that enables it to get away with absurdly unrealistic subjects and to present them in a way that is totally bereft of a critical perspective. By appearing to tackle the issue of class head on, by making it into their obsessive subject, the British film makers endowed it with an eternal, unalterable facticity before which the spectator would bow his head in mute acknowledgement that that indeed was how life was. If the post-war British cinema overtly preached the gospel of the unity of all classes, and looked to the day when capital and labour would lie down together in harmony (*The Man in the White Suit* etc), it at least recognised that genuine conflicts of interest were involved and betrayed its ideological character by its uncertainty of tone. The cinema of the sixties, by contrast, replaced the working class with a work-

ing class hero, who wanted only to be successful, to have a good time or both. Yet even these restricted horizons were touched with a Promethean tinge — to ask for so much, these 'daring' movies seemed to say, was to defy the Gods and fly in the face of nature. The hero became a pathetic figure, whose dreams and ideals were so at odds with reality that they could only find fulfillment in fantasy — this, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, was the theme of pictures like *Morgan*, *Charlie Bubbles* and the Kiplingesque *If...* But the 'solution' was no more absurd than the problem.

Leo the Last

Boorman's cinematic apprenticeship was one of impeccable respectability: like the currently fashionable Ken Russell and John Schlesinger, he worked for some years in television, directing documentaries that were remarkable for their apprehension of the power of social mechanisms to pervert people's intuitive responses to phenomena. This articulation of the discrepancy between what people say, feel, and what they actually do, is the theme that recurs in modified form in *Leo the Last*, though it is only one aspect of a complex film: unlike that of others, Boorman's talent is not one that has atrophied in the transition from television to feature films.

His first feature, *Catch Us If You Can* (1965), handles unpromising material (of the Dave Clark Five) with some skill, moulding a lively narrative around the theme of the struggle of the individual against conformist collectivising influences (the 'establishment' in the guise of an advertising agency). His next two films were made in the States and gained critical recognition: *Point Blank* (1967) displayed a vitality and acutance that suggested a major talent in the making: its control of the tensions of the gangster organization (this film's social mechanism against which the individual (Lee Marvin) wages his futile struggle), its reduction of dialogue to a minimum in order to emphasize the significance of visual phenomena, its manipulation of colour, all contribute to the coherence of the parable, so that the image of the gangster environment quickly gains credibility as a microcosm of America.

Boorman's next film, *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), has not been seen in this country in the form Boorman intended, as the producers substituted a different ending to the one Boorman shot. Despite this, the film was again well received, and put Boorman in the position of being able to make his next film, *Leo the Last*, without interference of any sort from producers. *Hell in the Pacific* explores the nature of the forces that prevent the two protagonists (Toshiro Mifune and Lee Marvin) from establishing a lasting relationship: it is their (anti-) social conditioning (Britain and Japan are at war) that is the prime

Thus the merit of *Private Road* is that it trivialises everything which the cinema of the sixties sought to magnify. The exhaustion of old themes may yet signal the entry of new themes, given only the existence of opportunities which are not in accordance with the general situation and directors who are capable of making use of them. The alternative cinema is now on the agenda.

David Morse

Leo the Last GB 1969 Dir John Boorman Sc JB and Bill Stair Phot Peter Suschitzky Ed Tom Priestley Mus Fred Myrow Cast Marcello Mastroianni (Leo) Billie Whitelaw (Margaret) Calvin Lockhart (Roscoe) Glenna Forster-Jones (Salambo) Vladak Sheybal (Laszlo) Prod Chartoff/Winkler for United Artists (105 min)

obstacle to any mutual trust. The setting of the film is an island: once again we note Boorman's deliberate limiting of his field of view, by which he facilitates (1) that he has close control over aspects of environmental detail, (2) that his psychological exploration is unimpaired by extraneous matter, (3) that the film can work on the level of a parable, the metaphorical basis of the island as microcosm to the real world's macrocosm being clear. Precisely the same process is at the heart of *Leo the Last* (1969), in which the entire action takes place within the confines of one dingy London street which was painted black, as part of the successful endeavour to endow the film's visual texture with a quality concomitant to one of its central thematic statements: 'Racism is perhaps where it begins, but the reason the whole picture... will be in blacks, whites and greys is that I want to establish visually as well as thematically the farcical aspect of any sort of 'color' problem.'

The fundamental plot is disarmingly simple: Leo, a foreign prince, returns to his paternal home to convalesce. The house is at the end of a cul-de-sac, and is surrounded on both sides by tenement buildings inhabited by poor coloured workers. By watching events in the street from his room, Leo gradually acquires a close emotional bond with the oppressed, and gets himself a saviour-complex; upon discovering that he is the landlord of the whole street, Leo decides to liberate his tenants from such bondage, and finally the mansion is blown up by the collective efforts of the street's community. In outline like this, all seems simple enough: what transforms the script into a remarkable achievement is the subtly complex interweaving of several layers of significance, of themes, and of styles. Stylistically the film moves easily between realism (the opening of Leo's wedding rehearsal) and fantasy (its end); this oscillation is acceptable in terms of the film's unity because we are consistently aware that what we witness on the screen is a filtered reality: this filtering operates on two levels. Firstly the narrative is told from Leo's point of view, and Leo's status in this closed environment is

barely one of normalcy, in so far as he is in the throngs of rejecting his aristocratic life-style: this is graphically illustrated by the hyperbolic, gluttonous party-scenes in the mansion, which are presented directly through Leo's eyes. He can no longer respond to the egocentric hedonism of these absurd, macabre, fascist dilettantes. The problem is the acquisition of an alternative milieu for Leo in which to function. For at the outset, just as Leo is severed from his background by his moral/intuitive attitudes, so he is separated from the community of the street by a class barrier. Leo's isolation is manifested visually in two distinct ways, the first of which we have already noted in Boorman's treatment of the 'high-society' episodes: expressionist hyperbole. The second is inherent in the way in which we observe the poorer inhabitants of the street: through Leo's telescope (it is the perfect instance of camera as voyeur) which naturally minimises any physical proximity to the events observed. This mood is set from the opening frames, in which we witness Leo's arrival in the street; we watch through the windscreen of the car; it is raining and the images are indistinct and distorted; there is an insulating slice of glass between Leo and the rest of the world right from this point. Even when in the street, Leo remains insulated from the pulse of life, either through his incapacity to act (as when the old man falls in the street), or through the intervention, again, of glass: when he observes the chaotic episode of the pigeon let loose in the grocery store, his face is pressed to the window, peering eagerly through the grime. In **Point Blank**, Boorman used a chaos of 'Resnais-like fast cuts' in order to isolate Lee Marvin from all purely social explanation, background, context: Leo's deracination is established more delicately and integrally, for the technique outlined above validates its extreme both on the level of the evolution of the plot (it couldn't happen without the telescope), and on the metaphorical plane. For the significance of visual phenomena is emphasised by the number of silent events we observe through the telescope and windows. Our sensitivity to what we **see** is called upon through the film, and Boorman's use of colour, and, more importantly, recurrent motifs enhance the richness of the visual texture.

Just as the idea of a 'filtered reality' is established from the opening shots, so are two important motifs introduced: birds and water. The water on the windscreen bears an aura of gloom: (it is hardly the regenerative water of Fellini), and the image recurs in the ludicrous swimming-pool sequence (the seething mass of flaccid flesh deludes itself into feeling 'liberated', while Leo feels only wet and lavatorial); its final appearance heralds the demise of the pimps, in their dousing in the squalor of the laundry. Nevertheless the use of water serves more as a textural constant than a thematic base, unlike the symbol of the bird. Leo is an ornithologist, and there are references to birds sanctuaries in the first minutes of the film. It is because he is watching pigeons through his telescope that he first becomes aware of the curious happenings in the flats opposite, and the bird image takes on an elaborate metaphorical existence: where Leo is content to watch the birds from a distance, the young negro, Roscoe, actually

uses the pigeon for his own ends. Birds, we have been reminded, often live in a sanctuary, just as the bourgeoisie/aristocrats inhabit a sanctuary of privilege; Roscoe's capture and utilisation of the pigeon represents in one sense an attack on privilege, while in another sense Roscoe takes on (at least for Leo), the attributes of a bird, both literally ('the bird has flown' says someone of Roscoe when the police are in pursuit), and by metaphorical extension (Roscoe usurps the place of the birds in Leo's mind, or, alternatively, metaphorically 'captures' Leo).

Michel Ciment has pinpointed the essential qualities of birds: 'L'oiseau, c'est le mouvement ailé, l'abandon de l'enveloppe charnelle, la rupture avec la matière, l'envie de quitter la terre décevante et sordide. Mais aussi... l'oiseau presque tout sphérique est certainement le sommet, sublime et divin. de concentration vivant. On ne peut voir, ni imaginer même un plus haut degré d'unité. Excès de concentration qui fait la grande force personnelle de l'oiseau, mais qui implique son extrême individualité, son isolement, sa faiblesse sociale.' L'oiseau est pour Leo à la fois ce qu'il voudrait être et ce qu'il est.¹²

Leo is a bird that has been immobilised and isolated by the banal mediocrity of the surface of life: he eventually feels the potential beauty of the world, but a process of re-education must take place before he can find it. Thus Roscoe appears to Leo as both hero and teacher, and he is the catalyst that enables Leo to make the all-important flight from social isolation to communal integration. Yet to what extent 'integration' is achieved Boorman leaves in some doubt: the ending of the film has an ambiguity that cannot be offset by the apparent optimism of the last lines of dialogue: 'Well, you didn't change the world. — No, but we changed our street.'

If the film actually ended on this note, all might be well. However, Leo is still very much alone at the end, as the camera lingers on him gazing silently into the ruins and laughter echoes around the rumble of Leo's ancestral mansion. It is worth recalling the original ending of **Hell in the Pacific** (which still remains in the French prints of the film), in which the two protagonists separate, realising that their private alliance cannot surmount the barriers between them. Much of **Leo the Last** is concerned with Leo's breaking down of barriers — but barriers need not be broken from both sides: to what extent is Leo (the saviour) accepted by the populace? The question remains open but in the feather-weight allegiances of the women in the laundry and the street, which bounce easily from Leo to Jasper to Laszlo to Leo, there is little ground for the optimism of Michel Ciment who sees the end as a vindication of revolutionary politics in the hands of the masses.¹³ Boorman's view is too cynical to accommodate only easy faith in the integrity of the people.

But then, in view of the stylistic complexity of the film, with its frequent oscillations from realism to symbolism, from satire to lyricism, it is unlikely that we will find a simple unambiguous 'statement' at the close. Since the only consistent 'camera-view' we get is one reflected through Leo's troubled mind, it follows that the film is not so much social commentary, as it is a psychological study. Certainly



Reeducation of the Borgeoisie (**Leo the Last**)

social concerns are important, but specifically only for the development of the narrative: the initial rich/poor, white/black dichotomies are revealed as simplistic, and Leo's paternalistic mini-revolution has its basis in an oppressed/oppressor opposition, which allows for the revelation that just as some white men are 'Beneficent', some black men are 'Exploiters'. Such a statement is barely sufficient to carry the weight of as fine a film as **Leo the Last**, though it is of sufficient strength to give the film its structural solidity. It is the continuance of the social thematic (in terms of the evolving sets of dialectical oppositions outlined above), that permits the central exploration of Leo's mental state to be broken into two sections: his phases of passive inaction ('I love the people in it (the world), but only at long range'), and his subsequent action.

Boorman's vision in **Leo's the Last** is one of pro-

found maturity; denying the veracity of a straightforward 'realist' approach, with its attendant philosophical simplifications, he manages to articulate some of the psychic barriers that have to be broken before the 're-education' of the bourgeoisie can be accomplished: this articulation takes the form of a melange of styles: the soundtrack's excursions into burbling incensequentiality, with its neo-Prufrockian tone of despair, resignation, and confusion ('Trying to connect you...'), just as much as the cheerful surreality of many sequences (the grotesque buffet dinner and its subsequent leery seductions), or the overlay of songs on mute visuals: all blend into a coherent, if complex, unity, a unity that is at once dramatic conflict and acute psychological probing.

Martin Walsh

¹ Boorman in an interview in *Sight and Sound*, summer 1969, p 121
² Michel Ciment, quoting Michelet, in *Positif* no 118, p 35
³ *Ibid*

Cinema and Education

The British

The case for the Education Department

The role of the BFI is set out in its Memorandum and Articles of Association which stipulate that the Institute is to act as an agency for film users. Public sector involvement with the British Film Industry is in any case small and the BFI has no stake in production or the industry, its governors are to be appointed 'with due regard to the importance of associating the Institute with the users of films'. And the report of the Committee of Enquiry into the future of the BFI defines for the Institute an active policy of promotion of the use of film, its study and appreciation: 'The Institute's objects are to encourage the use and development of the cinematograph as a means of entertainment and instruction' and '... promote appreciation of film as a form of art and the specialised uses of film — largely in the field of education'.

Clearly there are inherent contradictions in the Institute; its practice of engagement in production, distribution and exhibition of films, its assumption of an entrepreneurial role, sits uneasily with its defined role, a role that enjoins it 'neither (to) seek to control nor attempt to interfere with purely trade matters in the film industry. The discrepancy between the role of the BFI, whose work goes to define the nature of the relationship between the cinema and society its activity as an agency in British film culture designed to promote and develop that culture, and its practice — has been manifest for years. The crises brought about by its internal contradictions have led to the resignation of two governors of the Institute (Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson), a written manifesto of com-

plaint by senior staff of the BFI describing the 'demoralisation and frustration' of the staff, the replacement of the chairman of the governors, the resignation of the majority of the Institute's Education department, its education officer, and a general dissipation of the energy and resources of the Institute.

The most serious of these events is that involving the Institute's staff and the relegation to limbo of the Education department. For of the Institute's work it was that of the Education department which conformed most closely to the defined purposes of the Institute. There have been no public statements by the establishment of the Institute about the nature of the conflict with the Education department and the chairman of the governors has declined to discuss or expound the prevailing ethos of the BFI — on the grounds that a policy statement is to be made public in the near future; one may hope that it will define the policy of the Institute more precisely that were the objections to the practice of the Education department (it was categorised as 'too dogmatic' and 'unrealistic and rarified').

Until the BFI's statement is issued the nature of the management's quarrel with the Education department can only be a matter for speculation¹; for the past and current policy and activities of the department have been fully expounded in the official annual publications of the Institute.

The general attitude of the Education department and its specific manifestations (the programme of publications, seminars, lectures — all criticised by

management) have been explicitly acknowledged and practiced in the past. The policy has been, and properly so, activist — in accord both with the demands of the state of film study and education and with the BFI's Memorandum of Association. The self-definition of the department in its annual reports conforms well with the role of an agency, of promotion and development, put forward in the Committee of Enquiry's report: 'It is becoming increasingly obvious that the growth of the movement as a whole is dependent on making headway with defining more accurately the content and aims of film study' and adding: 'The idea of an agency is more dynamic than a concept like museum. The idea of film culture, is to imply an alliance of artist, critic and teacher in an activist programme'.

The Education department has been concerned with fostering a debate about the nature of film study and education, defining a programme of action for its practice, perhaps open to question in some of its tactics, but nonetheless formulated openly in conjunction with practicing film teachers and existing user organisations; notably the *Society for Education in Film and Television* and with the aim of supporting and consolidating existing activities. Its work has ranged from the Schools Council Humanities Curriculum project to encouraging the study of fundamental problems of cinematic signification — surely not inappropriate in an institution that should be, *pace* the report of the Committee of Enquiry: 'ensuring [and] publishing authoritative work of academic standard'? A

Film Institute

discrepancy between the admirable programme of the Education department; the establishment of a regular Summer School, support for new film magazines not as has been suggested on a sectarian basis — *Cinema*, *Afterimage* and *Monogram* have been helped — and most importantly the provision of advice and information for film teachers both practicing and aspiring: the regular and explicit enunciation of these policies in annual reports and the remit of the Institute is hard to detect. Still harder is it to construct a rationale for the destruction of the Education department by its parent body.

And if the Education department is 'unrealistic and rarified' then the status of the NFT, describing itself in the BFI annual report as a 'museum and university of the cinema' defies the imagination. A National Film Theatre that can limit its archive screenings to 6 in a session and regard itself as a museum, and offer a meditation on fantasy in these terms:

'This fantasy element is not always stressed and has sometimes masked itself for reasons of some interest as another kind of cinema. 'Triumph of the Will' for example was intended deceptively to look like a realistic if emotional documentary actually it is an unreality masking a deep and disturbing fantasy view of the world', as appropriate to a University can only be described as 'unreality masking a deep and disturbing fantasy view of the world'.

The anomalies, inconsistencies and contradictions of the BFI might offer a little grotesque Ealing fun did they not jeopardise the livelihood and prejudice

the work of the staff: it is admittedly inconvenient to go to Brussels or Paris for an archive cinema but it can be done, one can always read *Positif* instead of *Sight and Sound*, or enjoy the never never land of the annual balance sheet; its mysterious subventions to offset the losses sustained in a centralised Regional Film Theatre programme, and the magic accounting that can swell the cost of film extracts by a factor of ten. But people's work is at stake, the status of film studies in Britain is at risk and members of the Institute — whilst having no control over the policy or administration of the BFI — are still theoretically liable to defray financial losses proceeding from its activities. Article 8 of the Articles of Association states inter alia: 'Every member of the Institute undertakes to contribute to the assets of the Institute in the event of its being wound up while he is a member, or within one year after he ceases to be a member for payment of the debts and liabilities of the Institute.'

But the intentions of the new chairman have not yet been made explicit: so we may hope that the forthcoming policy statement will include:

(i) A statement of future policy, clearly defined in accordance with the Articles the Report of the Committee of Enquiry, of Association, the recommendations of and meeting the needs and situation of British film culture,

(ii) A reconciliation of the present practice of the NFT and publications departments with their roles as defined in the annual reports of the Institute and the Recommendations of the Committee of

Enquiry.

(iii) A commitment to a more fully detailed annual financial report. At present members' financial commitments are greater than are those of shareholders in limited liability companies, and they receive less information and are able to exert less control than can shareholders.

If the tub shortly to be thrown out by the chairman of the BFI governors is unable to sustain any hopes for the future of the Institute, for an end to its tradition of authoritarianism, secrecy and dissipation of purpose, of human and material resources, then the activities of the Members Action Committee² offers the only possibility of advance out of this politics of rotten boroughs and administration by cabal, a condition in which the only satisfied members of the BFI can be those who enjoy: 'The sublime peaceful state of being well deceived, of being a fool among knaves'.

R E Collins

¹ This article was written before the BFI Annual Meeting on Dec. 14th 1971. See Screen, Autumn 1971 for detailed articles on the current crisis in British film education.

² The Members Action Committee was formed in 1970 by a group of BFI members to make the BFI accountable to its members. The committee is made up of film makers, critics, lecturers and other users of the Institute and exists to publicise a critique of the policy of the Institute and to mobilise support for a change in the BFI's practice and control and organization.

The ability to express metaphysical undertones in human behaviour in images on the screen, subtly, but decisively, differentiates the creative level of the American cinema from the British. The latter is in general dominated by the outward and visible life, and the images on the screen have no other meaning than on a purely literal level. This lack of substance inside the narrative is a central factor of the impoverishment and mediocrity of the British cinema. The widespread aesthetic and social assumptions of its directors are depressing and disheartening when compared with the allegorical and metaphysical interpretation of the Hollywood directors who communicate through visual symbols and metaphors.

In the British cinema the work of American directors (omitting the large number, devoid of talent) falls into one main group; Leo McCarey (*The Devil Never Sleeps*), Otto Preminger (*Bunny Lake Is Missing*), Jacques Tourneur (*Night of the Demon*), Hugo Fregonese

Blowing up the British Cinema

(*Harry Black*), Robert Parrish (*The Purple Plain*), Tay Garnett (*A Terrible Beauty*), Robert Aldrich (*The Angry Hills*), Andre De Toth (*Play Dirty*), possess both exceedingly varied degrees of talent and utterly different sensibilities, but in all these films their preoccupations are universalized rather related to any special characteristics of

British culture; their approach embodies a full consciousness of the work they have already done in the United States, conferring upon their British films moral, psychological, emotional and physical dimensions and an integral style which were the distinctive properties of the American cinema. Joseph Losey's position is quite different, carrying an essen-



tially English social and cultural mission, which, added to the strength and delicacy of his sensibility, has established him as the only major artist of the British cinema.

The work of these American directors puts the inadequacies of our own countrymen into perspective; an insufficiency caused by lack of talent as much as an imperviousness to the principles and methods which are incorporated into so many personal and individual Hollywood films. The resulting lack of an affirmative viewpoint and of a strongly sensed personal commitment is perhaps the key to the general absence of a rigorous and unified narrative style. *Ten Seconds to Hell* (1958), a Hammer thriller directed by Robert Aldrich, provides concrete evidence of the conflict between the values of Hammer and the British cinema generally, and the artistic intentions of a talented American director (it was cut down from 113 to 89 minutes); it also reveals not only a great deal about Aldrich's sensibility, but more significantly the unfulfilled potential of the fictional cinema in Britain.

Ten Seconds to Hell is ostensibly a thriller about a bomb disposal squad in post-war Berlin, but Aldrich's real concern is the need to confront fascism. Apart from their physical power, two members of the squad stand out from the rest. Eric Koertner (Jack Palance) by virtue of his moral decency and sensitivity, and Karl Wirtz (Jeff Chandler) by virtue of his nihilism and smugness. Wirtz, viciously determined to exploit the weaker members of the group and capitalize on the suicidal nature of their work, proposes a death pact in which each of the six men pools half his pay for three months, after which any survivors claim all. The rest subscribe to the pact without much consciousness, but for Eric Koertner it involves the crucial responsibility of opposing a fascist morality.

The characterization of the two men ensures that they are in no way invalidated as individuals because they have a democratic and fascist significance imposed upon them; the moral and political content thus reinforces the narrative built on violence and suspense. The director's positive attitude towards each character is one of the strengths of Hollywood, but encountered in a British film it calls attention to the neutrality and impartiality of the British cinema (one of the fundamental weaknesses and shortcomings of its directors).

In *Ten Seconds to Hell* the dark labyrinthine imagery is not in the least arbitrary or flashy and clearly springs from a foreign conception and experience, the compositional pattern having been carefully applied to give a clear insight into Eric Koertner's tormented

dementia, his masochistic self-torture caused by his struggle with Karl Wirtz as one by one each member of the group is blown up. Aldrich confronts his characters in big close-ups with a definite purpose. Pushing his protagonists into the same shot with Jack Palance tremblingly profiled in the extreme foreground he brings into relationship Eric Koertner's moral consciousness and emotional turmoil with Karl Wirtz's jealousy of his high ideals and intense hostility against him. The point of the foreboding symbols and claustrophobic visual organization throughout is strengthened in the final very long shots taken from a high angle of Koertner leaving Wirtz to the impossible task of defusing the bomb alone; the spatial organization suggests the wider meaning of psychological as well as physical exorcism. By the extraordinary intensity of his unyielding close-ups, Aldrich assaults the sensibility of the spectator, causing a physical and emotional involvement in the conflicts and relationships. In a shot of Koertner engulfed in the hoops of an iron railing he gets right under the surface of his hero, a motif that suggests the pressure of unconscious forces on Koertner's mind and the terror that hangs over him.

It is precisely this use of metaphor, and passionate involvement conveyed by the power of the director's imagery, and good acting, which is typically American and quite absent in the work of our directors. The close-up shots of Koertner and Wirtz, a thousand pound unexploded bomb between them, seen together within the frame as they endeavour to defuse it, bring to light the kinship between the two men, their intensely shared emotions and experiences. The director has the aesthetic capacity to broaden the scope and intensity of the relationships beyond the limits of the scenario. The development of emotional and moral conflicts by the notion of combining the protagonists in an involuntary alliance is a popular practice in the American cinema, and a potent one in *Ten Seconds to Hell*, giving the relationship between the two main characters an undertone of feeling of empathy that very few British directors would have the aesthetic means to express clearly. The concept of a bomb as the symbol of the malignant evil embodied in Karl Wirtz's doctrine of self-reliance must go unchallenged as the most remarkable metaphor in the British cinema.

The contradictory temperaments of the two main characters in *Ten Seconds to Hell* has a familiar pattern in Aldrich's work; Jack Palance and Jeff Chandler are both victims, fated to suffer until they resolve their abiding obsessions to destroy one another and the morality they uphold.

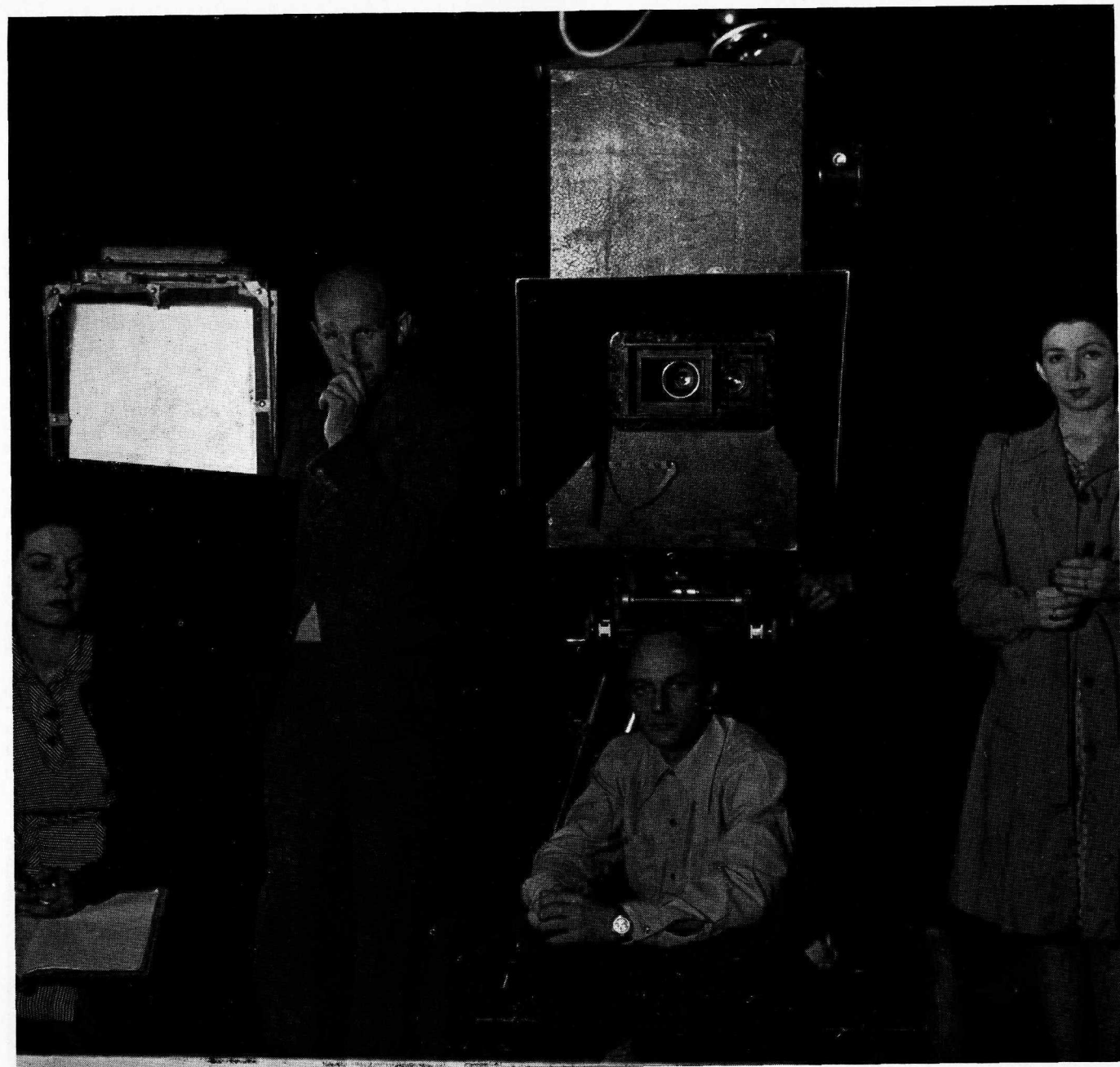
Death is a driving force inside both men, and Aldrich clearly delineates two opposing impulses in Koertner's mind: readiness to die in his fanatical determination to bear the burden of confronting Wirtz's ideals, and the instinct for self-preservation, the wish to survive the barbarous and degrading world he has endured for so long. Aldrich also presents Karl Wirtz as a fully rounded character. As well as his murderous egoism, he carries with him an acute melancholia, loneliness and self-pity. The struggle between the two men reaches its climax as Wirtz is faced with a type of British bomb that cannot possibly be defused by one man working on his own. When Koertner comes to his rescue, the vehement jealousy of his idealism and intolerable feeling of inadequacy drives Wirtz to a treacherous and abortive attempt to kill him. The close-up of Jack Palance, helplessly paralysed, with one finger supporting the firing pin, and his free hand struggling with the cable Wirtz is using as the murder weapon, is a brilliant climax of symbolic action, but archetypal of the American cinema generally. Aldrich doesn't add any condemnation of Wirtz other than the formidable one implicit in his act of moral degeneracy, which is shown as a consequence and symbol of his ideology.

Finally, defeated and left alone in a suburban setting wasted by war, which universalizes and epitomizes his view of life (demonstrating the instinctive gift of American directors to reveal and enlarge their characters by giving them a symbolic context of this sort), Karl Wirtz turns his destructive impulses upon himself.

The bomb explodes, and as Jack Palance's compassionate face emerges out of the abyss, the images testify that Robert Aldrich, like Joseph Losey (*The Damned*), is more than able to hold his own against the mutilating efforts of the British film industry to pervert and interfere in individual artistic creativity.

Andrew Milne

Ten Seconds to Hell GB 1958 Dir Robert Aldrich Sc R A and Teddi Sherman, from the novel *The Phoenix* by Lawrence P Bachmann Pr Michael Carreras Cast Jeff Chandler (Wirtz) Jack Palance (Koertner) Martine Carol (Margot) Virginia Baker (Frau Bauer) Wes Addy (Sulke) Robert Cornthwaite (Loeffler) Prod Hammer (94 min)



Interview Michael Powell

The expense of naturalism

R. Collins
& I. Christie

One needs no particular 'politique' to justify attention to Michael Powell; his work constitutes the only coherent body of film in the British cinema to date. Making fifty films in an industry notorious for its uncertainty, contradictions and contraction is remarkable enough. More important though, is the impressive variety: an operatic cinema that in **The Red Shoes**, **Tales of Hoffmann**, **Bluebeard's Castle** invites comparison with the musicals of Minnelli and Cukor, a series of political and ideological films located chiefly in the 'forties, an almost Godardian meta-cinema in **Peeping Tom** — each form of film-making Powell has chosen is unique in Britain and an original contribution to the cinema as a whole.

It is a reproach both to the British film industry and to British film criticism that Powell has had to do good by stealth for so long. His work demonstrates what the British cinema could be, and one notes with regret that there are not more films like **The Small Back Room**, **Black Narcissus**, **A Matter of Life and Death**, **The Red Shoes** or **Peeping Tom**, and that Powell's diagnosis of naturalism as the enemy has not been more wily translated into an effective strategy.

There's one theme across your films which strikes me very forcibly, watching them, which is the theme of artistic creation, of the strains and the agony of artistic creation.

Does that come out in several films?

I think it does. It comes out in The Red Shoes, Tales of Hoffmann —

Oh well, that's the theme of **The Red Shoes**.

In Peeping Tom, too. And most interestingly in Age of Consent, where somehow the artist figure has a quite different status to that he has in the other films.

Yes. The only failure of **Age of Consent** was that the artist himself was not original enough.

Well, we were very curious about that. There's a sense in which the things that he actually does are rather uninteresting and unsatisfactory.

I thought that let the film down.

Would you like them to be different from what they were? There's one shot, if I recall, where Mason is actually standing with his canvas on the beach and Helen Mirren is standing in the water and it's a deliberately composed shot, it seems to hover almost between slight absurdity and a kind of universality. It looks like being almost a confrontation between the painter and the subject but there's also something very literal about it. I wonder if that was intended to suggest a hint of parody?

I don't think it was, it was just that I wasn't getting what I wanted, I think that's how you'd sum it up.

Is this something that you're not particularly conscious of yourself, that you pursue this sort of theme across a number of films?

No, I certainly wouldn't pursue it, I mean I wouldn't shove it in — it's part of my life, I suppose.

For instance, if you take The Small Back Room which is a film I like very much, it seems very like one of the films about art because in a way the central character there is a kind of artist — he has a very intense, subjective approach —

He's dedicated.

— and he lives on an emotional knife edge. And in some ways it's a better film about art, I think, than a lot of films about art, because it conveys the sort of single-minded obsession, and he runs the risk of disintegrating, literally.

I would accept that.

What about your project of The Tempest? I would have thought that this is again about the status of the artist, the status of the creator.

Yes, I think it will be done eventually but up till now all the budgets have cost too much, and I can't really get the budget down until I find the right man to collaborate with me on what I want to do. Gerald Scarfe who was going to do a lot of the monsters and masks and things in it, he's never been a film designer and he hasn't got the technical knowledge, although a very good tech-

nical creator, to take the huge jump that I want to take away from naturalism. You see what is at the moment or what has been steadily ruining films for the last twenty years is the expense of naturalism. The average producer only understands naturalism, if he understands that; — I'm talking about producers not directors. I think the reason why there are such poor directors on the whole today is because there has been such a saturation of films on their eyes and minds that it comes to the point when they can look at anything and think 'Oh well, I can do that and do it better.' Well, it's not so easy as that. It's exactly the same in painting, or in any art really, if you get to the point, you know, where you've seen so much that you think there's nothing to it. And you can only be relaxed if you gather round you such a stupendous team of technicians and craftsmen that they're all contributing just as you are and you're only controlling it all as Lermontov was in **The Red Shoes**.

Do you feel the loss of a team of very talented collaborators such as you had in The Red Shoes and Tales of Hoffmann, do you feel that it's harder now for you because you can't assemble the same kind of team around you.

Yes. Very definitely. If you all understand each other then you can produce a **Matter of Life and Death**. But if you don't, if you don't all have confidence and understand each other, you can't.

I wonder if that's got anything to with the fact that the last two of your films have been in Australia.

Certainly with, well not the first one. **They're a Weird Mob**, because that was merely a romp in Australia in the early American manner, in other words it was a take-off of the early American film the — **Ruggles of Red Gap**, for instance — exactly like it, except I'm not such a good director of the human comedy as Leo McCarey, I think it's just heaven — there are very few McCareys. But it had the same quality generally and I was quite pleased with it.

It seems to me that one of your great contributions to the British cinema has been a kind of attack on naturalism and a refusal to rest content with naturalism and a constant attempt to try to go beyond it.

Yes, that was at first purely visual and artistic but now it is absolutely economic. Unless we are able to tell a film completely without naturalism I don't see any future for any budget for any film.

When you say naturalism you mean the naturalism that requires a lot of location shooting.

Yes, not only that but a lot of necessarily real things which are just there because they're real. In the early days of the cinema you see it was true that a tree was a tree, shoot it in Central Park. But now if you go to shoot a tree in Central Park you take a crew of eighty with you, you see what I mean?

It seems to me that one of your great kind of leaning in your work towards

German stories, subjects —

Not particularly German, I've always been in the Common Market culturally, and I know much more about France and French literature than I do about German. Only, it has just so happened that it's been, I suppose through association with the Hungarians, you know Korda and his brothers, Emeric and his friends — that slants you towards Central Europe and Germany if something comes up. This film which I think we're going to do, is a German/Yugoslav co-production, but that just happens to be, not because I wanted to do it, but because it's a very good Yugoslav story which the Germans also want to do. And I think everybody's had this experience that although they would like to work in France, the language difficulty of writing particularly, the creative part of the language difficulty is far more difficult in France than it is between us and German. I read mostly French literature and of course there's no comparison either in the style or the attitude of French literature with English.

In your films the foreigners characteristically do seem to be Germans rather than French or Italians.

Possibly they might have been because I go back to the early days of cinema when the Germans were a big influence, the Germans and Russians were the greatest influence in the cinema — of Europe — and I'm really a European, I'm not particularly English and I'm certainly not American.

I think that's one of the things that we admire most about your wartime films, the generosity and the clarity with which you do present Germans.

Well, a lot of that was due to Pressburger. He was clever enough, he knew the Germans very well, and he was quite clever enough to know that the only way to get the Germans by the soft underbelly, is to portray them as they are and then suddenly turn a somersault.

So you're saying that the good Germans one sees in the wartime films, the Walbrook figure in Colonel Blimp and the baker and the Hutterite community in 49th Parallel, they're there for explicitly propagandist reasons?

No, it's because a German, taken out of Germany becomes less hysterical and more creative. You see this in the Expressionist painters and the Mannerist painters — as long as they go on talking to each other and banging their heads on their canvases —

There is one film which is not I suppose strictly yours, you produced it, The Silver Fleet, I don't know how closely you were involved in it —

Very closely. I haven't seen it since we made it but it was quite a good little film.

I watched The Silver Fleet not knowing that you hadn't directed it and I was really surprised at the end to see that it was directed by Vernon Sewell, but I thought I could see your hand and more than your hand in it.

Well, I certainly didn't stand over him,

it's just that I suppose the attitude and the conception — attitudes are everything, aren't they? and style.

I think a lot of your films are about values, even about ultimately, political values.

About values, yes. It always puzzles me that people don't realize how many of our films were entirely original. In the history of films this is extraordinary. That people should make a run together of sixteen films of which ten or eleven were entirely original. Except for Chaplin which is different, almost a different medium. I don't think it can have happened. If it had happened more often I think the cinema would be a happier and better place. But that refers back to during the war — every single film we made was made on a general premise of what would be entertainment in a year's time. And so when we made **I know where I'm going**, it was a film that we decided to make about moral and material values. **A Canterbury Tale** was specifically about the difference between a materialist and the ordinary person you know. The Denis Price character was the materialist. It was specifically about that. He was the one we regarded as the materialist, the downright man who has a reason for everything.

Yes. But when he reaches the Cathedral the suggestion is that he's aware of other values.

Well, it didn't quite happen like that; remember there was a scene on the train where Culpepper has quite a long talk with the soldier for the first time really, in which their conflicting views are very carefully expressed. And at the end of which he gives up and says 'Well, what do you think that I am?' And Culpepper says 'Perhaps you're an instrument.' It's a very important line. And he says 'I'll believe that when I see a halo around my head'. And the train runs out of the tunnel and his halo appears. So he doesn't know what's happening to him, but it starts to happen when, as a pilgrim, he reaches Canterbury Cathedral. So it doesn't in other words — he doesn't go to do it, it happens to him because he's a pilgrim.

Is this interest in the exploration of moral and material values the reason why so many of your films seem to be set more on the peripheries of British life — in the Northern Isles, in the Hebrides, Tibet and far-flung areas of the Empire. Is it that you think that it's in those kind of areas, at the fringes, where the conflict, the struggle is most apparent? Or do you think it's misleading to say that that is a characteristic?

Yes. It's a very good question. It isn't true of course, because the same struggle goes on in the centre of London.

Yes. But it's very rarely that your films are, if you like, about the centre of London.

Very rarely.

Literally one of the only one of your films that seems to be really in the centre of London is Peeping Tom, isn't it? The only one I can think of.

Can't call Melbury Road the centre of London.

He does appear in what might be Soho.

I was just thinking it is a most interesting question, and I'm damned if I can answer it at the moment. Whether it was that the theme was easier to develop in a very simple setting, whether it was the early training which was always to go out and photograph something new.

The thing which in fact put me on to this question was something you say in the Foulia book. I think the quotation is: 'The conquest of Nature by Civilization is a fine thing, it is always printed in big capitals. But what good is Civilization if it drives the strong, hardy, independent people back from the outposts to live in towns.' But is it as simple as that? There seems a real disgust and despair with towns, as if nothing healthy can come out of or develop there.

No, That was really referring to this specific case.

You said in passing that you'd always wanted to make a film of Kipling's story 'They' — was that a serious project or an aberration?

Yes, yes, I think it was a serious project. I'm a mad Kipling fan and somebody, now who was it?, well, somebody seeing the retrospective of my films and afterwards, not before, she read afterwards quite a lot of Kipling's long short stories, and she said 'O I see where an awful lot of your images and people come from.' She said that she recognized very many things that are taken for granted in Kipling were taken for granted in my pictures. This had never occurred to me, because it was so much in my early days, this reading of Kipling; and it never occurred to me to ever make — and probably this is the reason — to make a film of a Kipling story, simply because I regard them so much as stories. But 'They' particularly is one of the few Kipling stories which could make a marvelous film.

Do you know his novel 'The light that failed'?

Oh yes.

You must, of course. It seems to me that's not too far removed from the atmosphere of some of your films like The Red Shoes.

Yes, so it must be a very strong influence, of Kipling. It's a very dangerous thing to say in an interview because the average person associates Kipling with Jingoistic sentiments and probably hard cruel military cantonments and all that sort of thing. But of course he was a much more complex person than that. He was also a very good poet, on his good days. I mean Yeats and Eliot, well Eliot had more good days than Yeats. —

I think Eliot probably selected his good days very carefully for record.

Which you're not able to do always in films. I've always gone on consciously growing up and living in films, never using films as a medium. When I was — I was sixteen — in 1921 I read in this magazine the description of people mak-

ing films I said 'This is for me', that was all, and ever since then I've just grown up with films. But of course I hadn't grown up only knowing films. I was very quickly involved in film-making which in those days was not necessarily show business, but I was always mad about the theatre, and these things combine. I see an enormous amount of theatre all over the world and opera and everything, but I see very few films. And I only go to see films when I want to be humble, and stagger out thinking I could never have done that. Then immediately I think how I could have done it better.

I was intrigued by the preface to your book 'Graf Spee' where I think you say that the book needs to be written because it's a more enduring form than the cinema. Now does that come out of a sense of despair, that you're never going to get anything else started, that you're never going to be able to do the kind of films that you want?

Well, every artist feels that after he's just done something.

It seems a curious thing for you to say though, that literature, the printed word is more enduring and more important than the cinema — for someone who says 'I live the cinema, I live in the cinema'.

I think every now and then a wave of despair sweeps over me about distributors.

What kind of future do you see for the British cinema — any at all?

Oh yes, and for the cinema generally, yes. I would expect to see the cinema in the next fifty years move away from big business entirely into its proper form which is an art form. And I would expect to see people regard making a film exactly like writing a book or painting a picture and I would expect to see a very simple and easy way to make a film with mini cameras and mini lights and everything so easy for an enthusiastic team of three or four people to tell a story. I expect to see much more of this. And I expect to see this as the main pattern of story by film. The book which I'm making notes for and assembling all my archives and things for is called 'The Story-tellers'.

I was reading the book of Stravinsky's 'Conversations' and in it he mentioned a project that I gather you had put to him in I think it was 1952, to do some scenes from the 'Odyssey' in the form of a kind of Masque I think he said.

Nausicaa episode with Odysseus. Dylan Thomas was writing the words.

How did you conceive this — what form would it have taken, had it come off?

Well, I became enthusiastic in the idea of — which of course is coming up now — which is that out of all the creative artists in the world whom you could really call the top creative artists, perhaps five per cent have worked in the cinema, ninety-five per cent have never worked in the cinema — and I thought after the success of **The Red Shoes** and **Tales of Hoffmann** which interested painters and poets all over the world — that I could

get together a group of staggering people — well I had the obvious people like Picasso and Graham Sutherland as painters and other people too, poets like Dylan Thomas. And I said 'We will give you twenty hours of entertainment in colour, but some of the stories will be two hours long and some may be two minutes, I can't tell you exactly because you see you can't get a really first-rate artist to work in the cinema because there's no place for him. If you're going to work on a feature film your salary is so-and-so, if you're going to work on a short your salary is nothing, it's more or less that, you know, if you're going to work on an experimental film it's minus. This is the general attitude towards the most creative story-tellers in paint or verse or writing or anything. And I knew I could get anybody I wanted on these terms, if only somebody would back it. And one of the projects was this short episode from the episode in the *Odyssey* when Ulysses is washed ashore and Nausicaa and her maidens come down to sea-shore, you remember, to wash the linen and they were going to dance on the linen in order to beat it out, and we had a hymn and I wanted Stravinsky to do the music and Dylan the words. Graham Sutherland, for instance, wanted to make a detective story in the reeds at

Maira Shearer in **The Red Shoes**

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp



the mouth of the Var in Nice. In those days there used to be reeds at the mouth.

You seem to have had a great deal of freedom and a great deal of control over your films.

Yes, and when I didn't it was a disaster.

Is that characteristic of film production in Britain as opposed to what it was in the States. And was that what essentially kept you in Britain, rather than going to the States, like Hitchcock?

Yes. Because I'm not a real folk genius like Hitchcock, you see. I work with the materials that are there and I try to get the best. If they're not the best I fall on my face, you see. Hitchcock is really a folk genius. He's a Cockney at loose in the world, and every now and again it works marvellously. When it doesn't, out comes a *Marnie* or something like that, because Hitch is bored — I'm very fond of Hitch. He was the first director I worked with when I came from France. We became friends then and have been friends ever since.

You said that two films of yours that have been interfered with most were *A Canterbury Tale* and *The Small Back Room*.

I didn't say they'd been interfered with, because people were still afraid of us then. But they did ask us to cut sequences. But they wouldn't have dared to have come onto the set because if they had I'd have stopped work.

You did say in connection with *Phantom Light*, I think you were talking to Kevin Gough-Yates, that it gave you an opportunity to use 'visual shocks', visual notes and shocks. I don't know if the phrase means anything to you. But it does seem to identify something in a lot of your films for me which is a use of a often very anti-naturalistic device, to shock the audience, to really startle them at some point.

Yes. As far as I remember I was left alone entirely to make it — that's probably why I said I had more opportunity on it. As long as I made it and delivered it on the budget, nobody cared very much what I did with it.

There's a tremendous sequence of almost Russian cutting, as I would think of it.

Yes, it was the only way to do it.

You've got the pistons of the ship, the bows of the ship, the light itself, all cut in a big montage — very Russian style really. It looked like you were having some fun on that.

Well, it was the only way I could do it — wasn't enough money.

But, much later than that, when you had much more control over your films, this seems to hold true. If there is one characteristic of your films, right across the decades, it is a wish to disturb the audience at times, often by a very striking visual single shot or something that really disconcerts them. Something like the eyelid closing in *A Matter of Life and Death* — the most extreme example.

Yes.

But there similar sorts of examples in lots of the films. Was this ever something you consciously worked out, an idea of jolting the audience?

No, I should think it's probably from early influences in Europe. German and Russian, and French. Yes, German probably more than Russian.

Even in *Black Narcissus* I think the magnificent final sequences are almost like something out of a German picture, a UFA film.

Are they?

Yes, well it's when the nun returns to the convent. The composition is very very striking, because one knows it's all done in the studio, which I still find hard to believe — it is really rather reminiscent of, say, one of Lang's big spectacles in the twenties.

Well, that's partly owing to Alfred Junge.

Had Junge worked in Germany as a designer, as a film designer specifically?

Oh yes. He's one of the great technicians of the cinema.

He hadn't been a painter like Heckroth.

No, he was a film art director who developed — his great passion in art, being a German, was Dürer. It's a shame he's dead now, he would have gone to the Dürer Nuremberg exhibition this year. But he was a dedicated film designer. He came — I think his wife was Jewish but he was not — but I think he came with E A Dupont to this country, that's the only reason he came. Because he was E A Dupont's film designer — *Variete*.

You were using German-trained and German-based art directors. This seems to set them aside from so much that was being done in Britain. I wonder if this was regarded as being something rather foreign and exotic — were you regarded as being unique in your preference for using Alfred Junge and people like him?

No, because Alfred Junge, for the three or four years before the war, had been chief designer for MGM British here, and after the war indeed went back to them as chief designer. He was the the designer of *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, *The Citadel*, *A Yank at Oxford*.

Is it fair to say that you encouraged him perhaps to be more individual, more so than in his other films?

We were both trained in the great European tradition of design and cinema, where everything is possible and has to be done in the most perfect way possible. For instance, he always found, as I did, English studios disgusting because they let all the dust accumulate on the overhead girders and if you have any big bang or explosion or somebody drops a set or two, then a deluge of dust descends upon you. This is typical of a British studio. A German studio would be vacuum cleaned probably every month and the floor would be oiled, everything would be spotless. It would be run like a German theatre was run — how I would expect a theatre to be run, and how I've never seen a theatre in this country run. We were both perfectionists, in other words, and trained properly in

a very great tradition.

I am reminded of something Fritz Lang said once in an interview, he said that when he went to the States, to Hollywood, he found not that Hollywood was inferior to the facilities he had at UFA but rather that he could do more in Hollywood. He gave one example; he said that nobody had ever heard of a boom at Ufa, and this was commonplace in Hollywood, and you could move the camera much better. Do you think that's true? Does that suggest that maybe UFA wasn't as great as it's always said to be.

No, I think it was a great film-producing centre, but you are talking about the introduction of sound, where probably the Germans may have been working on directional microphones or press microphones and didn't want booms. Anybody who wants a boom anyway needs his head examined. In the early days of sound films, of course it was wonderful to have these flexible booms which at least gave you an arc of ten feet. Then of course they invented telescopic booms which shot the microphone out to thirty feet. They're still a perfect anachronism, like trotting a dinosaur around with you. If sound men were worth their salt in the first eighteen months they would have invented tiny mikes which picked up everything that was necessary without being visible. But they went happily on with bigger and bigger booms.

Am I right in thinking that you were having a bit of fun at the expense of English or very rigid styles of shooting in *Peeping Tom* in the studio sequences?

Yes, a bit.

Where you show, you really send up the whole process a bit.

A bit. Well, there didn't seem any other way to do it, you know. Film people anyway, filming film people — there's something doubly artificial about it.

That appealed to you in *Peeping Tom*?

Well, I decided to send the whole thing up anyway. In other words you saw a lot of idiots in command and a lot of dedicated technicians very quietly moving around. That was the point.

Yes, that's one of the things that comes through from the film. Your hero is, after all, a technician.

I'm a technician, not a visible idiot. There are always directors like that. I remember reading a lovely story of a safari in Africa; they would come to a different village, you know, and there would be a big Ngoma put on for you, a big native show. And he very soon noticed the different kinds of producers of the show who were the Chiefs. Sometimes the Chief would be out front 'Ho Wa Ho Wa Ho Wa' and oiled all over — in front of everything, you know. Sometimes he would see a very worried little character whizzing around the back and saying 'No, no, no, come in that way, Oh you bloody fool, you've ruined the whole thing' you know. This is me.

You talked about your successful films being the product of a happy collaboration. Do you think that the achievement of the early German cinema and of



Frederic Ashton in *Tales of Hoffman*.

the American cinema during the thirties and forties and perhaps the early fifties, is due to there being this established studio system — a lot of very skilled and intelligent and dedicated people available for collaboration?

No, it was close collaboration with the other arts, the theatre and painting.

You titled your lecture at the NFT 'The Beauty of Image' and it's clear that the way you speak of the art directors and the evidence in the films that you are very interested in the visuals of the film. What kind of ratio do you prefer working in? Three of your films have been in some kind of wide screen process. You've done some work in television — do you make any distinction between the kind of thing you like working in. Do you like Cinemascope?

Well, no, not very much. The American Cinemascope of course is better because it has very little distortion, if you're careful. But most of these other 'scopes like the Russian one, have such colossal distortion, it's just ridiculous. I went to see this potted version of *The Big Battle* the other night, and they were

using the 'scope system, and as soon as people stepped off the centre of the picture they became like in a distorting mirror. No, on the whole I think the academy screen is the best. What I've always been against, all my life, is projecting it in the cinema with a black surround.

Really? What would you prefer instead of that?

I'd like a photo-electric cell sympathetic surround for colour films, so that the overall tone that was on the screen wouldn't suffer.

Like the way Seurat framed his pictures.

I nearly got Rank to adopt it at a time when they were really spending money on technical developments and I was in charge of that, technical developments on the camera side. Korda always said and I don't know how much he knew, because Korda was such a tremendous showman, he said I was the greatest technician that he'd ever known. I can do almost anything, given the right collaborators. I never am in the least worried about anything, you know.

In *Oh Rosalinda* you actually exploit the qualities of the poor Cinemascope.

Yes. The lenses were not very sharp, were they? We certainly tried. I thought using very defective lenses at that time we were a bit too daring.

You were having a bit of fun with the Cinemascope in the drunken sequence in *Oh Rosalinda* where you actually tilt the lens, don't you?

Yes. That's right. In those days the lenses besides being somewhat defective in sharpness, also had a focal depth that was fantastically small. Five feet, six feet, something like that.

The Queen's Guards looks again very odd, if I may say so, because at times, especially in the parade ground sequences you use Cinemascope in a very rectilinear fashion, very four-square — of course it's the subject matter — but I found that interesting because you're not trying to distract attention from the fact that it is such an odd shape, you're almost using it, drawing attention to it.

Yes — it was quite a problem with the parade ground.

Lang says, the things he likes about

Hollywood, was that there were a lot of very skilled and intelligent and competent people with whom to work. And this is the way he accounts for the success and his sense of satisfaction with many of his American films.

Well, I don't know what Lang may have meant. He had an enormous sense of humour and he was an absolutely darling man. I think he mainly meant that when he wanted something done it was done absolutely superlatively. He's not a shouting, bawling Preminger you know, or an egomaniac genius like Stroheim. Lang is a marvellous man, and he found that everything he asked for was immediately produced, and done very well. This of course was staggering to him because a European director is accustomed, practically, to do everything himself.

And that's the way it is in Britain, is it, you have to do everything yourself, struggle pretty hard to get what you want?

Mostly, I think, yes. When I say do everything yourself it means that you have to. For instance, the Rank organization of course, started this way with groups of dedicated people like our own people in the Archers and the people in Cine Guild, you know, the John Bryan, Ronnie Neame, David Lean, Anthony Havelock Allen group, Sidney Gilliat, Frank Launder and their friends — another group. It was only when the Rank Organization became big business and bought all the Odeons and all that sort of thing that they started to follow the Hollywood pattern of saying 'The director just directs that, and the trick department does that; the editor reports to somebody else' — this is the Hollywood method. And in the case of a great director like Lang I'm sure he was able to buck the method. What entranced him and fascinated him was I think the technical skill and the money behind it, in the service of artist.

And he certainly had a lot of very bad experiences with the front office.

Well, you see, after this first thing of course he would find this coming up. They always welcome you to Hollywood and give you everything you want on your first picture, and afterwards the shadows of the prison-house close around the dangerous boy.

Could we ask you to talk a bit generally. Do you have any feelings about the state of the British cinema? Good tendencies you see in it, or bad tendencies or any kind of immediate future.

I think it's gone back a great deal to a rather defiant amateurism.

Which is a good thing, you think?

Bad thing. I'm not sympathetic to amateurs of any kind.

Are there any particular films or people who have started working in Britain recently who seem to you to be promising?

Yes, Christopher Miles in *The Virgin and the Gypsy*. Outstanding talent, as I understand it — should develop enormously. Because the good thing are very very good and the bad things are very, very bad.

Any others that you feel the same way about?

Well, I liked Seth Holt very much, but

he's dead. Of course, I admire Joe Losey as a film-maker, but I find he's never quite in an English skin, that's all, otherwise he's just marvellous.

Another man who's got this series of regular collaborators, with Pinter and Bogarde and Richard MacDonald.

Yes, it certainly helps. Schlesinger I think has a great talent. I thought the one he did in the North, *A Kind of Loving*, a beautiful film. I didn't like *Darling* but I like *A Kind of Loving*. He's a very honest, marvellous fellow.

What about Reisz, do you like Reisz's work?

Well, he's only brought off *Morgan*, really. Lovely talent, but he doesn't seem to be able to come to terms with, well, who could, in the last five or six years it's been very, very difficult for really creative people. There's been too much money in the country in the wrong hands, too much power in the wrong places. A man as clever as Reisz who makes a big success like that is going to get talked into things that he shouldn't do.

It's interesting that British musicals or British films with music and dance having a central part, seem to be coming back into the cinema these days, like *Isadora*, and some of Ken Russell's work.

He's a lovely monster, isn't he, Ken Russell? I was told by somebody in Australia that he had agreed to direct 'Voss' in Australia, you know Patrick White's book. Whether it's just one of those things or not, I don't know. But I imagine he knows what he wants.

What's your German/Yugoslav co-production going to be about?

Oh, it might come off. I've got, well actually, mentioning *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, the composer of the music there which I thought was very good. I saw him afterwards, and I thought he was very talented, and he's doing the music for it. It's a rather gentle, funny story, a Yugoslav story, a sort of Hans Andersen story, of a small boy, not so small, fourteen or so, who is a shoemaker's apprentice, and he gets in trouble because a pair of boots is too small and he has them thrown at him and he gets very injured. He decides to put the boots on because they fit him alright and go out into the world and break them in. He meets another child, a girl, who's been left behind by a Circus and is trekking on to catch up with the Circus again. It sounds rather like a sort of early Duvivier, doesn't it? And they do, eventually catch up with the Circus and the Fair and it all works out a bit differently — there's a big chase at the end. And in the end they all come back again — there and back again — a sort of Yugoslav Hobbit. He goes through some quite amusing adventures but I think it will be — in other words it won't be a funny peasants or that sort of thing, it will be a rather gentle picture, I think. The music's developing very well.

It sounds as if you've almost started from the idea of what the music should be like.

Well, such a story is bound to really, because, you see, lyrics have to be written against the progression of the

story. Also you've got a problem that the story takes place somewhere in the time of the Austrian Empire, about 1905. The boy is a very well known, he's a Dutch boy actually, he's a terrific German singing star called Heintie. I went to see him, he's a very nice boy, mad about horses. Very good boy. He's just about that age between a child and a man, you know, which is rather good. But everything depends on the musical pattern really, because I saw all the locations they'd picked. They're quite good, very much down-to-earth sort of stuff.

Is it fair then to ask you how this is going to avoid the trap of naturalism, that you're going to shoot on location?

Partly by costumes and partly by the treatment, I think. No, it certainly won't avoid the taint of naturalism. It has to be worked mainly from the music, the music has to be the master. They produced a script full of descriptions and dialogue and things like that which I timed roughly, it was about three and a half to four hours. So when it seemed as if they really were going to do it and had the money, I did them a shooting script which cut it down to size, which really reduced all the scenes to a few lines, put all the onus on the music and occasional singing. William Sansom is a marvellous lyric writer, very good novelist, short story writer, he's writing the lyrics.

I hope it does come off. I hope *The Tempest* does come off I'm very much looking forward to seeing what you do with that.

Yes. I think it will, you know, a lot of people are going for it. I think with luck we shall probably get it going next March or so, March or April. But up to now we've wasted a year on various attempts to set up a financial pattern which would work. And meanwhile I've been waiting for Leo Marks to finish writing *The Nailers*, which we're going to do together. You know he wrote *Peeping Tom*, yes, this is again original. It's a beautiful idea, and just as terrifying and highly unwelcome, except they can't resist it, the boys who put up the money, as *Peeping Tom* was in its day. I wanted to call it 'The Worst Years of our Live', which I think is a wonderful title, but he was a bit scared of that so we called it *The Nailers*.

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Interview Barney Platts-Mills

Thomas Elsaesser

I remember first reading about you in connection with picketing a Royal Performance to protest against your film having been taken off and not being given proper distribution elsewhere. What were your problems with British Lion over the distribution of *Bronco Bullfrog*?

After we had finished the film, that is, cut the picture and produced an independent soundtrack, we showed the film to John Boulting, who liked the picture very much and offered to distribute it for us. Naturally, we were very pleased, because we thought we had at last found someone who would take the job of selling and distributing the film out of our hands. Boulting wanted a few changes, and I spent a day with him in the cutting room. He also wanted the picture re-dubbed. Well, there were a few changes we didn't mind making — after all, if Boulting really liked the film and was willing to help us, it seemed a bit mean not to give him a little say in how the picture would finally look. For example, the freeze-frame at the end was his idea. I simply wanted a cut, but he said, no, you can't do that, what you need is a freeze-frame. OK, so we did a freeze-frame, more to please him than because we were convinced. He then let us use the studio and equipment down at Shepperton for the re-dubbing, and eventually a married print, that is, one with picture and sound on the same film strip, was made.

But by that time, Boulting, I think, was already fed up with us, he thought we argue too much, and he went round saying that he had spent £7,000 to complete our picture, implying that we had come to him, as inexperienced beginners, asking him to help us finish our job. Which is one of those distributors' myths, and in our case simply wasn't true. He spent £3,000, but that was because he wanted to change the film, not because it wasn't completed. We obviously resented the implication that our producer was incompetent. In fact, he brought the film in well under budget. We had £20,000 for *Bronco Bullfrog*, and it cost us only about £18,500 when it was finished. When the film came to be released, Boulting had completely lost interest, and probably couldn't care less about how it was put out. It opened at the Cameo Poly at a time when building work was going on in the cinema, and it had to come off after two-and-a-half weeks to make way for the Royal Performance of the *Three Sisters*. Obviously, that kind of treatment is bound to kill



As fragile and brittle as a piece of glass (*Private Road*)

a film, especially from an unknown director and with no stars. So despite very good reviews the film disappeared. We then did a bit of publicity on our own, and *Bronco Bullfrog* got written about in all the papers, which didn't exactly endear us to Mr. Boulting. At the Cameo Poly, and on British Lion's calculation of a two-and-a-half week run, *Bronco Bullfrog* could not possibly have made anything but a loss. They claim to have spent £4,000 — and they probably

did — on advertising, posters, etc. The majority of film distributors, when they open in the West End, actually calculate not to make money, because their aim is to get the film on general release. Very often, you're committed in your contract to spend anything between £3,000 and £5,000 a week on publicity — and that isn't really helping anybody, except the people who stick up the posters.

After you had finished your second film, *Private Road*, you then decided to

set up an independent distribution for it. How did this work in practice?

There are quite a few cinemas in London where you can put on a film, provided you guarantee the proprietor a fixed sum of money at the end of each week. It's called a 'house nut', and is presumably calculated to cover the running costs. In the case of the Notting Hill Gaumont, where we opened **Private Road**, it was £650 a week.

On the other hand (provided there isn't anything in the small print which we've overlooked), the decision is ours when the film is to be taken off. And we haven't yet signed away the rights for **Private Road** as we did for **Bronco Bullfrog**, so whatever happens with our own distribution, we're free to consider other possibilities, like selling the film to television. The original agreement we had with British Lion on **Bronco Bullfrog** was far more favourable than the terms under which we are now operating, but in actual fact, quite a few of the agreement's stipulations were never fulfilled. For example, we were assured that Eady money would be paid directly to us, but two weeks before the film was to open, we received the standard contract, and there was of course no mention of the Eady money going to us, it went to British Lion. At the time, we were too anxious to see the film open to play tough, so we signed, though in retrospect that was a big mistake, and all we want now is to get **Bronco Bullfrog** back from British Lion, but they are asking £10,000 for it, and that we just haven't got.

How did you come to set up Maya Films, your production company?

Adam Barker-Mill, James Scott and myself formed a company — I honestly can't remember how long ago — five or six years ago — and we started making pictures rather like we make them now, by begging and borrowing money wherever we could lay our hands on. But we've always been very bad at selling our films. Then we were joined by Andrew St John, and together we set up Maya Films in its present form, together with a self-supporting facilities company.

How do you finance your films?

Through a merchant bank, and by knowing rich people. There is no other way at the moment, at least until some form of state money is made available. For example, I think the National Film Finance Corporation ought to be turned round immediately, they ought to have a policy that obliges them to co-finance at least ten pictures a year, with budgets of up to £40-50,000. That I would consider a good government policy. They could well pursue other things at the same time but by being committed to this number of films, with half the money coming from outside sources they would be really helping to create an area of low cost independent film-making, something which has never existed in Britain.

Presumably you set up Maya Films in order to make films yourself. Have you ever considered whether your company might one day be in a position to offer

production facilities to other directors as well?

O yes. But it is a terribly difficult thing to do. This is certainly what we are working towards, both in terms of production and distribution, the idea being that eventually the film industry and opportunities to make films will become generally more accessible to everyone.

Do you feel at all conscious of belonging to a certain tradition of film-making?

No. The way Adam and I make films is very much the result of our own chance experience. I started in feature films — editing — and therefore learnt the basics of film-making. Adam actually studied film, he is a bit more knowledgeable, but even so, he is very pragmatic in his approach. The most important influence for me has not come from film at all, but from Joan Littlewood and her theatre in Stratford. I once edited a short for her — that was after she had made **Sparrows can't sing**, which she herself didn't like and wanted to have destroyed.

How did you come to make **Bronco Bullfrog**?

Bronco Bullfrog came about as an extension of a documentary I was making about improvised drama based on what Joan Littlewood was doing in her theatre with local kids. It was there that I made contact with the people who were eventually to act in **Bronco Bullfrog**. It wasn't actually in the theatre, we were in a kind of barn, a warehouse which was leaking, cold and miserable. But all the same, she tried to make the kids do some acting, just to give them an opportunity to do something with their time — they were all about fifteen, they had just left school and were rather bored of an evening. That's when we made **Everybody is an Actor**, **Shakespeare said**, which is quite — boisterous, but certainly not educational in the way it was supposed to be. I wanted to make a film quite seriously about improvised drama in schools, but it got rather chaotic.

Private Road was made with professional actors. How did this compare with **Bronco Bullfrog**?

It is very difficult for me to compare the two films in this respect, because the experience of making **Private Road** was a particular one. It wasn't just that there were professional actors, lots of other factors contributed to making the film a rather difficult experience for me. In any case, I intend to make cheaper films in future, and I shall probably revert to 16mm, which I think is perfectly adequate. This is important if we're talking about independent production, because you can make your film on 16mm, blow up the copies to 35mm, and present them as entirely legitimate feature films — provided you have a really first-rate cameraman like Adam. Today, you can make films entirely without reference to the system, but you can still show them in the ordinary way through cinemas.

To shoot 16mm is a third of the price of 35mm, and the blow-up makes it about half the price. **Private Road**, on the other hand, was made entirely within the rules,

six weeks' shooting schedule, union crews, colour, etc., and it is a phantastic strain, I think the film suffered from this — of course, it also gained in other respects —, but I would not like to be in that position again, of having to make a film in six weeks with that kind of pressure on and that kind of money being spent every day. Because even though I didn't particularly think of the money — we were spending nearly £1,000 a day — somebody did. When one talks about an independent production, it sounds all very nice, but in actual fact, it wasn't all that independent, certainly not independent of money.

What kind of film would you like to make next?

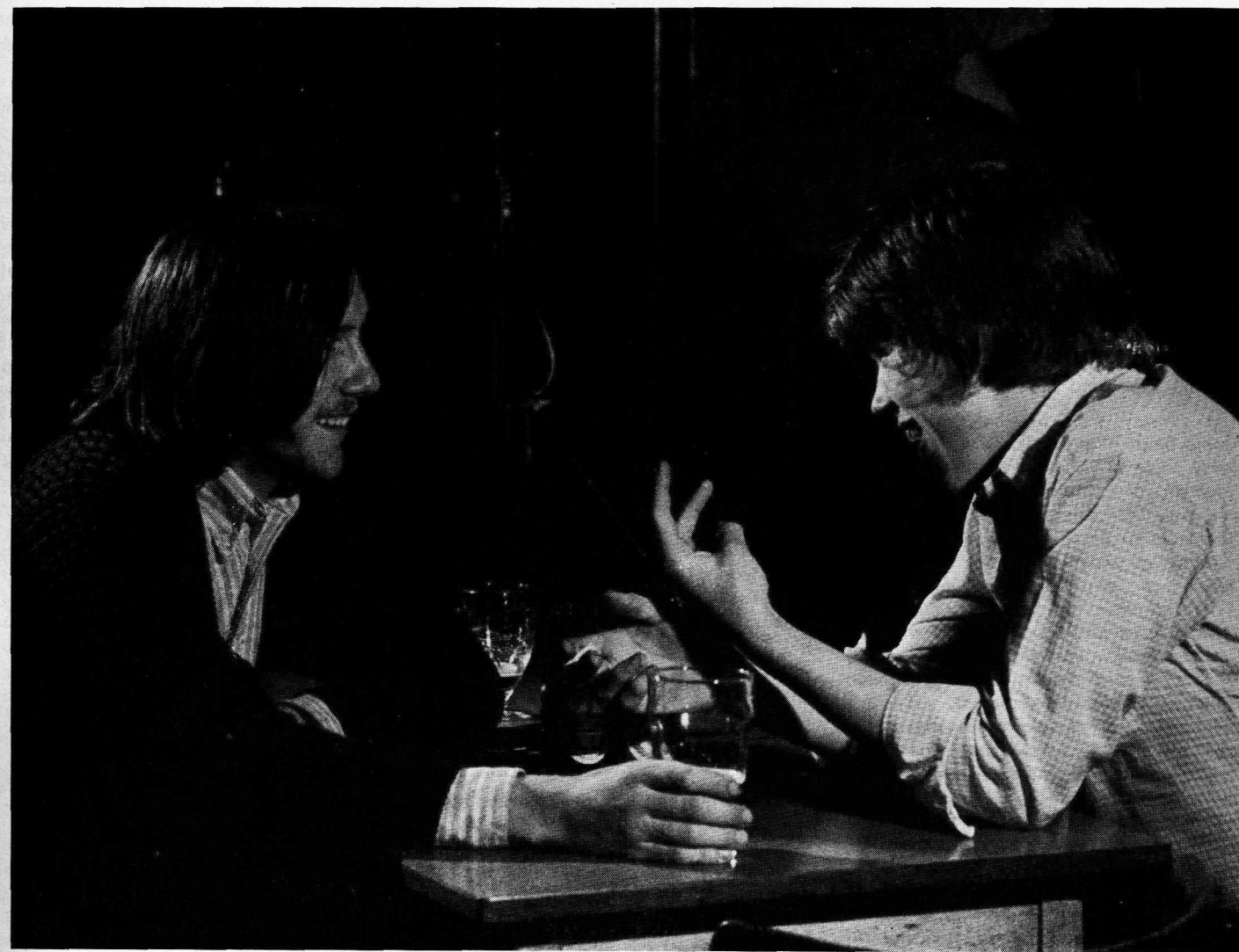
The general opinion is that now after **Private Road** we ought to get enough money to make a film properly, stars, big budget etc and make a few bob so to speak. But I think absolutely the reverse, we ought to have little enough money in order to do it right, take our time over it, have as few people around as possible. The films that interest me, the films I want to make are quite particularly about the individual characteristics of human beings, and to that end, it isn't really possible to use professional actors. At the same time, I think of film primarily as a dramatic medium, and in many ways, **Bronco Bullfrog** is just the kind of film I enjoy making, except that it is probably not dramatic enough, and some of the people in it aren't quite right, I'm now confident one can do better than that. I want to make films which are on the one hand more dramatic, and on the other, less imposing on the people in it, less dependent on the director telling the actors every move and every gesture. I think the director's task ought to be more to create a framework, an atmosphere where the actors can be themselves.

You mention that you would like your films to be more dramatic. What kind of drama are you thinking of? — I'm asking this question because it struck me that in both your films, the dramatic implications of the material remained somewhat unresolved and even — this applies more to **Private Road** — deliberately underexplored. Both films for example, end in a state of suspension. —

— perhaps that's just because one hasn't decided yet. I do not necessarily think that drama implies a more precise ending, or perhaps what I mean is more tension, not drama.

If one is talking about drama in the conventional sense, one tends to think of psychological drama, of a conflict or clash between different interests, motives, modes of life and so on. Now it seems to me that in **Private Road** this is there in, as it were, embryonic form — the young couple exposed to external and internal pressures. But what one gets is often a sense of tension, of unease, awkwardness, which is very well conveyed — in short, a kind of tension which is not normally associated with drama, but more almost with anti-, and even ciné vérité.

Characters — and situations as well — start off in my mind as embodiments



An attractively a-social friend (**Bronco Bullfrog**)

of this and that, but then I tend to look at them and think 'I never heard anyone say that' — so out it goes. I don't think the drama in either film can be resolved. The films are mainly about irresolution as the natural state of human beings, and both the films are intended as a criticism of society for requiring resolution from people.

How do you feel about 'genre' movie? The British cinema, especially in the '50s produced some excellent thrillers — by Losey, Seth Holt, Cliff Owen, Roy Baker, Cy Endfield — which often had a marvellous sense of place, of character and setting. I was wondering if this kind of cinema would appeal to you, where you can rely on a fairly strong plot and a dramatic framework, without having to impose too much of an emotional melodrama.

A 'genre' picture implies a strong, simple dramatic tension, which is on the one hand attractive and on the other, I think, might be attractive because it doesn't mean much. I'll probably try to make a picture based on a simple dramatic force one day — one with love, hate, jealousy, fear and all that. Gangster movies appeal to me a great deal, there is room there for a lot of the things I'm interested in. But **Villain** or the other one, **Get Carter** — they're like a lot of films today, clever and meaningless. The

danger of drama is of course that the characters get warped when one makes them act in a certain way to fit the plot. The way I direct actors makes it very difficult to get them to do anything other than what for them seems to ring true. I think, for example, almost all the good parts in **Bronco Bullfrog** were due to the kids being left alone. And even so, there was still too much interference on my part, too much imposed on them.

I have a feeling you may be a bit too modest about your own contribution as a director and editor. For a start, the timing and the emphasis is often exceptionally sensitive and lucid in **Bronco Bullfrog**, and a scene like the one where the motor-bike gets knocked over by a lorry is successful, it seems to me, by the way it is fitted into the overall movement of the film, for that gives it its deeper meaning — of small ambitions being suddenly reduced to nothing, and the sense of futility about trying to escape from a restrictive social milieu through affluence and material values. I grant you, it's the natural reticence of your actors as well as the distance you keep as a director which allows these scenes to 'work', but that they work on a variety of levels seems to me the greater achievement, and that depends on the mise-en-scene of the film, on the director's conception of its themes, I would have

thought, rather more than on the actors being given scope to improvise.

Actually, what the scene depended on was whether or not we could afford the bike...

You have been bracketed with Ken Loach, partly on the basis of sharing working-class subjects. Do you see any common ground between you?

I don't know him personally, but I rather admire him, I must say, the way he keeps himself to himself. I enjoyed **Cathy Come Home** and **Kes**. We probably have a common interest in social problems and reality, rather than psychological problems or entertainment that is escapist. I suppose I'm slightly more concerned with glamorous films than he is, he is a political person, and I'm not.

While watching **Private Road**, I noticed how similar it is to **Bronco Bullfrog**. In both cases you have a hero, rather uncertain of who he is and what he wants to do, getting involved with a girl. Together they make a bid for freedom and independence — a motorized holiday in the country — which fails for one reason or another, whereupon the boy comes more and more under the influence of an attractively a-social friend (a juvenile delinquent in **Bronco Bullfrog**, a junkie drop-out in **Private Road**), and the films end with a token gesture of anti-social

solidarity on the part of the hero (attacking the probation officer, stealing the electric typewriter), while both the girls are almost obsessively preoccupied with creating a 'home'. Were you conscious of the parallel while making *Private Road*?

Well, I suppose I did notice, at least everyone who was making it noticed how lazy I was, doing the same things twice. I ought to add, though, that to a certain extent *Private Road* was made with professional actors, in colour and with a full crew just to see what that implied, and in that sense it probably is almost something of a re-make.

I daresay, from the point of view of some future Platts-Mills scholar, you certainly display a remarkable degree of thematic consistency... But what struck me was that somehow the transposition into a different social milieu had slightly altered the meaning of the story, or at least, your own critical evaluation of it. I felt at times that the situations didn't reveal as much about what was going inside the characters, and therefore seemed less convincing than in *Bronco Bullfrog*. This may be a purely subjective impression, but I felt, for example, the fact that the hero of *Private Road* is a writer explains at once too much (about his social status, the fact that everybody is rather spoiling him) and too little (about what sort of person he really is) and there seems finally no specific or necessary reason why he acts in one way rather than another, whereas in *Bronco Bullfrog* one clearly felt the relation between the hero's acts and the moral and social dead-end he is in and which blocks him off from coming to any meaningful decision.

I think the situations in *Private Road* were as true, but what is wrong is the people. This brings us back to the question of professional actors, or perhaps more accurately, of using actors who don't know very well and who are out of their surroundings—that's what makes *Private Road* perhaps less true. In fact, the hero would block himself off rather than be blocked off by social circumstances, as in *Bronco Bullfrog*. And this is the problem. If one had got closer to a 'character' who was the central character, then it would have carried more conviction, say, if the person playing it had been in his own home. As it was, it was almost a Studio picture, there was so much imposed, and I really don't think I want to construct things that much again when making a film.

I can see that with professional actors you have to work out your script in a much more deterministic way, but some of the most convincing scenes in *Private Road* seem to me those where the actors are given very little freedom. For instance, a scene which I personally thought very moving and dramatically successful was the one where the junkie shoots up in the couple's bathroom. For what one witnesses is the boy and the girl suddenly becoming estranged and self-conscious in their own flat. For the first time, they really have to confront themselves.

The falling of the syringe into the wash-basin brings this tension to its necessary release, namely the girl collapsing into hysterics, and thus giving way to some overwhelming anxiety which is very much what the film is about. The idea of the sound of breaking glass seems to me an excellent piece of mise-en-scene, it not only makes the dramatic mood of the scene palpable, but it also defines the relation of the couple to each other—in truth as fragile and brittle as a piece of glass. Furthermore, one very strongly gets the sense of the disruptive role which unconventional behaviour plays within the confines of a bourgeois family set-up. When the syringe breaks, the whole fabric of mutual self-delusion breaks, and very logically, the girl throws a fit. I imagine that such a scene took quite some working out and rehearsing.

Yes, that's a scene which worked, but there are a lot of scenes in the film that don't work. The one you mentioned is a solid scene, it lasts about twelve minutes or so. The problem is to create a drama out of a series of situations which are each inherently real. What has offended me most in English films has always been the lack of reality in the behaviour of people. I have let the dramatic element suffer in order to preserve the reality.

I think the early part of *Private Road* suffers from the fact that one doesn't get sufficiently inside the characters. There were indications in the script of what is meant to happen, and I was going on the assumption that one could do the same as one had done on *Bronco Bullfrog*, namely that the people were there, and that they were real, but in the event they didn't come over that way. You can't 'observe' professional actors, expect them to play themselves. The weakness was that one was trying to make a film which was semi-documentary, using people who were employed out of their circumstances. *Private Road* was much harder work for me than *Bronco Bullfrog*, with a fixed shooting schedule there was less time to think, less time for the imagination to really get into the scenes, and far more of the 'O God, another day'—which is of course the circumstances under which the majority of people work. And frankly, I'm not prepared to work under these pressures again. So far, with us it has always been very much what we could do under the circumstances, and with the experience of *Private Road* behind us, I'm fairly clear of what we can do as well as what we ought to do—and I'm under no illusions, it's going to be hard, I had rather wanted to avoid working outside the film-industry, because obviously it has enormous advantages—the whole thing is set up, admittedly rather badly and falling to pieces, but there is money available once you've got the go-ahead, there is some sort of structure which takes a lot of work off your back. However, I'm now pretty sure the system is unworkable, and it's rather sad, it means you have to think of some think else.

In this respect your views coincide with those of some of the 'underground'

film-makers. Do you agree with any of the aesthetic conclusions that have been drawn from such a position?

Although we used to make films that way, just the two of us and occasionally another person, we'd never really been 'underground'. I've always been rather concerned with the structure of the film-industry, because that's where I started working. I didn't have a theoretical interest in film before I had a practical interest in the job, and when I didn't like the way I had to work, I tried to change a few things to make the job better. But it's like a bus-conductor trying to take over London Transport... The other thing is that it's very hard to find out where the limits of the system are without having become committed to making films within the industry, because opportunities for making films are extremely rare, to say the least, so that the majority of people who ever learn what the limits are have already become completely limited themselves. I personally can't make films that way, I hate having to employ people, I'm not interested in having people around unless they have their own motives for being there—so that really does define the things I can do, and those I can't—and I might as well admit that to myself.

And yet you are attracted to the idea of 'glamorous' films.

Yes, glamorous in the sense of making entertainment pictures as opposed to documenaries or information films, and I like the combination of music and image in films. I'm not too happy with the music in either of my films, in both cases it's semi-documentary, it was imposed by a decision to use in one case an East End group who work in a pub there, and in the second case, the actors did the music themselves. What I mean by 'glamorous' I guess is really a bit of circus atmosphere, darkness, then sudden lights, the orchestra starts up and here we go... the element of the spectacular, excitement—and in that sense, *Bronco Bullfrog* isn't really exciting enough in places—what I want is the spectacular that people are capable of doing themselves. I think that's what Joan Littlewood wanted to do and did—*Oh what a Lovely War* on stage was almost the perfection of that combination of the spectacle and the real, and that's what I'm aiming for, and from that point of view neither of my films so far is particularly satisfactory.

We are trying to get new premisses which are mainly intended for work with actors, a kind of cinema workshop, if you like. And at present, I'm working on a story set in Fulham, which is quite a strong plot about somebody who lets everyone down, and that will be acted just by local people whom I have known for quite some time now. What I'm hoping to do is a vaguely Brechtian film, with songs and so on. But the only way I think it can be done is with amateur actors and having a regular working relationship with them, so that they really get involved themselves.

Book Review

A MIRROR FOR ENGLAND
by Raymond Durnat
FABER & FABER
1971

'Tyler's close scrutiny of the films of the Forties makes him our age's central thinker if only because in the decade between 1935 and 1945, no irrelevant film was made in the United States.' Myra Breckinridge speaking, at the start of Gore Vidal's novel.

A more usual attitude to the British cinema is that of George Orwell, writing in 1941: 'The movies seem almost unaffected by the war, in technique and subject matter. They go on and on with the same treacly rubbish, and when they do touch on politics they are years behind the popular press and decades behind the average book.'

On the whole this attitude has been sustained by critics, among them some for whom scrutiny of the American cinema is a life work. Gainsborough, prisoner of war epics, Ealing comedy, Hammer horror, the Carry On cycle: the most prominent genres are seen as soft or escapist, the opposite of 'relevant', while even the celebrated real-life films of the early 60s tend to be closely based on 5 year old plays or novels. The result is that in Peter Wollen's words (*Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*) 'the English cinema... is still utterly amorphous, unclassified, unperceived'. Or was, until recently.

The Crazy Mirror (on Hollywood comedy) and now *A Mirror for England*: Raymond Durnat's titles announce a vision like Tyler's (or Myra's). The cinema reflects national life and attitudes. Apparently no irrelevant film was made in Britain in the (roughly) two decades after 1945. 'A new contentedness with the status quo is registered by Ronald Neame's *The Card* (1952)'—page 32. Whose contentedness is not made clear: Neame's, Rank's, the regular Guinness-comedy audience, the nation's. They are implicitly merged. The film exists as evidence of a certain spirit in the air which it registers, or mirrors.

Where Durnat differs from the Orwell-style dismissal is not in discovering ignored gems but in perceiving anew the main stream of British films. Writing them all off in the conventional way is

short-sighted because (1) they do often reflect real developments and attitudes and (2) insofar as they don't, they are reflecting a spirit of nostalgia or escapism or evasion which in itself is equally 'real'. Looked at it this perspective, it is hardly possible for any film to be irrelevant. At his most parodiabale Durnat could, one feels, write up anything that one cared to film or write or do at any moment as significant for being either in tune with, or against, the spirit of the age. What his book most conspicuously lacks is a study or theory of how a mass medium actually operates, of what makes the cinema a potential 'mirror' for a society in a way that goes beyond journalism or the other arts. There is nothing with the coherence of Paul Mayersberg's explanation of the 'iconographical approach' to films on pages 78-9 of *Hollywood the Haunted House*, and little reference to variations in audience to the processes by which films are set up and shaped. *Upstairs and Downstairs* (Box/Thomas, 1959) is seen on the strength of its middle-class central couple with a servant problem as 'a celebration of dawning affluence', yet it can more convincingly be seen as a mindless, timeless relic of an unreal convention. What is it that makes this film, unsuccessful on any level, suggest itself as a more valid reflection of current society than, say, the 'Anyone for Tennis' category of West End light theatre, which no-one claims to 'mirror' anything except the preconceptions of a small class of play-goers? The distinction needs to be defined. The book is suspended between sociology and aesthetics, its method impressionistic. Yet this looseness is its strength: one certainly rates it above any sustained criticism yet written of the British cinema, and above the more academically disciplined work in the field of cinema sociology (though I may not be familiar with the right books in this last category).

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'This work is meant to provoke discussion, not to terminate it' (Durnat, p. 11). 'What I want is observations, not

agreement' (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*). Both men's books commonly get received in irrelevant ways which ignore these sincere, and integral, hints.

Durnat's books, more perhaps than those of other critics, suffer badly from the casual way film journalism operates in England. It is somewhat cynical of the *New Statesman* to entrust the reviewing not only of films, but of the occasional large pile of film books, to John Coleman. Yet the standards of the other weeklies, or of the main film magazines, are hardly better. I have been waiting for a long time to express gratitude to David Robinson as, I think, the sole regular film journalist who manages to take a 'serious' line without becoming merely smart and self-regarding.

It is easy, like the wren flying on the eagle's back, to detect mistakes in Durnat and give the impression of superiority, as though one could have written the books better had one had the inclination. Durnat must have a pro-founder and better-applied understanding than anyone of post-war British cinema. I offer criticisms in the spirit in which they are invited.

For one so long in gestation, the book is amazingly full of factual errors. There must be 40 misprints or mistakes in the filmography at the back, and as many in the text. Sybil Thorndike is not in *I Know Where I'm Going* (Nancy Price), nor Adam Faith in *Serious Charge* (Andrew Ray/Cliff Richard), nor is David Knight the hero of *Orders to Kill* (Paul Massie). Charles Crichton, not Frennd, directed *Man in the Sky*; Willis Hall wrote *The Long and the Short and the Tall* before teaming up with Keith Waterhouse, and Wolf Mankowitz did the film adaptation; Michael Redgrave played Crocker-Harris, not Coker, in *The Browning Version*; the book's second still shows Donald Sinden not Denholm Elliott; Antonioni made *Le Amiche*, not *Gli Amichi*; and so on. A list of this kind always seems pedantic, but the fact that the book is so alone in this field, and thus likely to be used for reference, make accuracy the more desirable.

Durnat writes about so many films that one feels he should, like the Forth Bridge painters, ideally keep going back to his starting point to begin the operation afresh. Long passages are familiar from articles written five or more years ago. As soon as one sees a given film it is often easy to query the treatment it gets in the book, perhaps on the basis of a viewing ten years ago, and to feel that this is something other than simple difference of opinion. I can guarantee for instance that on re-seeing *A Boy a Girl and a Bike* (Ralph Smart, 1949) he would not write it off as abruptly as on page 123. It's not just that it is, within the canon of Ted Willis scripts, an arguably better film than the next decade's *It's Great to Be Young and No Trees in the Street*, both analysed in exhaustive detail; it is at least as interesting on any social or iconographical level, with its charismatic trio of Diana Dors, Anthony Newley, Honor Blackman, in a Northern location setting, confronting, and ultim-

ately parting from, 'Pinewood Man' in the shape of John McCallum. To read the book is to make a series of such objections, or contributions.

The ambitious shape of the book creates an anomaly: so many hundreds of films cannot be held in the mind together. The reader cannot keep up with all the references, nor can he trust the author to still believe all he has written. Again, because the book will be a reference one (like Sarris's on the American Cinema), every one of its judgments matters. At the same time, its value is precisely that it covers so much ground, and at least states an attitude to so many unconsidered films and people.

To return to Peter Wollen's formula, Durnat does, indeed, 'classify' as well as perceive: classifies by genre, theme, writer, director. There is an extraordinary ranking order of films at the back, and his estimate of directors is likely to be the most startling thing in the book. The division which he repeatedly, in effect, makes between content and form is a shock to anyone brought up to believe in their interconnection. He seems able to switch off, at will, that sensitivity to style-as-meaning which he elsewhere (the *Franju* book; parts of *Films and Feelings*; sections of this book, eg on Powell and Losey) has admirably demonstrated.

The Robert Hamer film to which he devotes most space in *His Excellency* (1951). Any student of Hamer will probably agree it is his worst film: a straight, stagey adaptation of a West End success about colonial unrest, it flopped and is unrevived. Hamer remains embarrassingly 'outside' the drama. Yet because it is at script- (ie play-) level a film ostensibly sympathetic to the outgoing Labour government, it gains an important place in the tracing of certain political themes in British cinema. The point is that Durnat makes no case for it as a film: one feels he might accept that it was both bad and unsuccessful. If its overt political commitment is so unrealised, and made so little impact, one questions its significance except as an instance of what the British cinema, or Ealing, or Hamer, was not at that point able to cope with. Yet in the book it is valued by its professed intentions: one wouldn't know that it worked less well than *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Most surprising of all is the detailed, respectful consideration given to such directors as Guest, Relph/Dearden, and the Boultings, and to such films as *The Browning Version* (Asquith), *80,000 Suspects* (Guest), *Sapphire* (R/D), *Heavens Above* and *Twisted Nerve* (The Boultings). These are all films I have seen since first looking at the book and each of them seem to me impossible to give the barest moral respect to, let alone serious aesthetic consideration. Durnat could most of the time be working from a script, for all the account he takes of the films' form or texture: performances, casting, linking of sequences, layout of shots, etc. *Heavens Above*, the Boultings' church comedy, I personally regard as reaching a level in the cinema below which it would not be possible to go,

and to support this view I have detailed notes with which I do not propose to pad out this book review. It is a genuinely worrying difference of approach (not just of opinion) and one is grateful to the author for provoking it so boldly. Most critics, I think, hated *Heavens Above*, yet it is a reasonably successful film in terms of public acceptance (Harold Wilson liked it): if, for all its demonstrable crudities, it has the degree of importance and influence Raymond Durnat attributes to it, then our attempts (and his own, when he writes of *Franju*, *Bresson* and others) to discuss subtlety, style and organic unity are so much dilettantism. Not a novel issue to be raised, but a refreshingly direct one in the increasingly hermetic atmosphere of film-theory debate. It would be good to set up a showing of (say) *Heavens Above* sometime and argue the issues through. This is not the feeling one usually gets when disagreeing with a critic, but it is in the case of Durnat.

The book should be read in sequence and not, at least until after the initial reading, used to dip into for reference. One can then avoid not being able to see the wood (argument, vision) for the trees (mistakes, irritations). The vision of a cinema which, for all the perhaps underestimated distortions and opacities, has been 'a mirror for England'. Rather than paraphrase or list the stimulating factors in the book, let me illustrate them with one phrase: 'Titfield Poujadism'. It is a superb, typical, formulation, of which no-one but Raymond Durnat would have been capable. The exposure of the decadence of late T E B Clarke/Ealing comedy (*The Titfield Thunderbolt*), its linking with the 'small shopkeeper' ethos that keeps recurring in the British films of the time and with the political climate of Tory Coronation Year: these themes are convincingly traced and then memorably crystallised.

In an excellent 20th chapter, on the pretensions and limitations of British documentary, Lindsay Anderson and his associates on Free Cinema suffer. Yet Durnat is generous to Anderson's *This Sporting Life*, as he is harsh with some of the work of the Boultings and of Relph and Dearden. The final impression is that this indicates a saving openness, that he is sincere in professing to want to 'provoke discussion, not terminate it'. Could I provoke him into looking (again?) at certain films he ignores or disposes of very briefly, such as: *Double Confession*, *A Boy A Girl and a Bike*, *The Long Memory*, *White Corridors*, *No Place for Jennifer*, *The Birthday Present*; and at the work of that darkest of horses in the British Cinema, Vernon Sewell?

Charles Barr

Editor's Note. We apologize to readers for the late appearance of this issue. In addition, we regret very much that some copies of issue no 2 contained a wrong sequence of paragraphs on pp 21 and 24. In the review *The Spider's Strategy*, the penultimate sentence of the last paragraph but one should have concluded with the words 'that true creativity displays itself'. We obviously need a proof reader.



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